There's a God Under My Bed
by Q it

Summary

Loki has always felt a little different on Asgard, cast out from his brother and his friends. But when he happens across a passage to Midgard, he finds himself under the bed of a hyper and overenthusiastic nine year old, Darcy Lewis, who is shocked there's a kid under her bed and not a monster. Loki soon learns that his new Midgardian friend shares not only his love of books, but also undying curiosity for the world around them.

Together, they make monumental childhood discoveries, go on dangerous adventures, and get into heaps...and heaps...and heaps of trouble.
Loki froze. He didn’t know where he was, though he did have a vague idea how he got there.

He’d been out adventuring with Thor and his friends. They weren’t supposed to leave the gardens without asking a guard to come with them, but they had gone anyways. Loki had always been really good at sneaking around the guards when he and Thor wanted to do something they weren’t supposed to. Sometimes they got caught, but that’s only because Thor was always too loud.

They had run off from the gardens, through the city and straight to the forest. Mother said they shouldn’t go in there by themselves because of the bilgesnipe.

“Thor, the Allmother said not to.” Sif said, crossing her arms indignantly, her blonde hair shoulder length and well groomed. Loki stayed sitting on one of the benches with a baby snake he’d found. It seemed to like him, slithering over his hand and through his fingers. He was currently trying to make it invisible.

“But Loki is with us! He could find a way around anything! Right Loki?” Thor encouraged.

He looked up from his now invisible pet, shocked that Thor had asked him anything in the presence of his friends. Usually he was only there because his mother told him he should stay by Thor to protect him. “I—“

“Thor! Sif!” shouted three boys, hurdling towards their corner in the gardens, clutching two bags.

Loki quieted again, turning the snake visible. Its slim pink tongue liked his thumb almost in comfort. Thor laughed, taking the bags. “What have we got Fandrall?”

The shorter boy with wispy blonde hair smiled. “Some food for our journey, though Volstagg has eaten most of it, some ropes, and two spare blades.”

“Excellent.” He said, a grin spreading over his face. His gaze shifted to the third boy, the shorter one with dark hair. “But who is this?”

Fandral’s excitement seemed to heighten. “This is Hogun. His parents are the Vanir nobles. I saw him training out on the fields. He’s really good and I figured he might want to come along.”

Thor began to approach the new Vanir boy when Sif protested. “We can’t just bring along everybody! First Loki, now this child!”

“Sif, if you don’t want to go then stay at the palace and be a lady.” Thor said the word like it was a grave insult.

“Take it back!” she yelled, balling her small fists.

“Sif is a lady! Sif is a lady!” Thor sang, running in circles as his friend chased him. Loki smiled a little, offering his snake a small ant that had been crawling on his seat. The little creature accepted it, opening his toothless mouth for the bug.

Eventually, Volstagg came between the two, pulling them apart. “Enough! Are we going or not?”
Thor brushed himself off, turning to Sif. “Of course we are! We’re going to kill a bligesnipe and bring it back to my father.” He pronounced proudly, his smile lighting up the gardens. Loki sometimes thought that Thor could be a little conceded sometimes, but he had reason to be. He was so strong even for a child. Often he wondered why his mother said he should accompany Thor to protect him. His older brother was much better at fighting.

“Loki, can you help us get around the guards?” Thor asked, taking one of the swords from the bag and strapping it on his waist like father had shown them.

He stood, setting the little snake down. “I can. But—“

“Fantastic!” he turned to the Vanir boy. “You, Hogun, how well can you fight?”

The quiet boy responded by pulling out a smallish mace, twisting it expertly in hand. “Well enough.”

Loki could tell Thor was starting to get ahead of himself. “What do we do, Loki?”

Fiddling with his fingers, Loki reviewed his options. Most of them meant he had to use illusions he had not quite mastered. But if he could make them, perhaps Thor and all his friends would be happy to have him go. Maybe Sif would tell him that he was a worthy warrior if he helped Thor.

The thoughts made his heart beat excitedly. “We will sneak through the gardens to the front gate, then I will create an illusion to distract the guards. Once they’re distracted, we can sneak by.”

Thor nodded in approval but Fandral scoffed. “Could you not simply transport us to the other side of the gate?”

Loki swallowed hard. Was he to disappoint them again? He could hardly move himself from his bed magically without losing consciousness. To move all of them…. “I do not have enough magic.”

“What do you mean?”

Sif sneered, coming out of her pout. “Fandral, you are dull. Even really good sorcerers can’t move many people great distances without trouble. “

Loki’s heart swelled with gratitude. Sif was standing up for him. She must like him more than Fandral.

“Does that mean you’re coming, Sif?” Thor asked, a hand on his sword.

She sighed, looking from Loki to Hogun. “Fine. I’ll come. But if anyone asks, I only went to keep you from getting killed by a beast.” She drew her own sword. “Let’s go.”

Thor lead the way with Loki in his wake with the small snake slithering around his hand while he whispered which steps to take to avoid tripping or breaking twigs. Finally, all of them were hidden behind a pillar, watching the golden gates to the palace. Four guards stood at the entrance, staring determined into the morning sun.

Carefully, Loki set down his pet that slithered and opened its toothless mouth at him. He smiled at the cute animal, stroking its short slinky back with his finger, allowing magic to flow through the little thing.

Volstagg made a gagging sound as he choked on a bite of bread. “Why a snake, Loki? That could
be dangerous!” he whispered.

Loki frowned as his little snake became a very long and thick serpent, seeming to be as long as three men put together. Much to his delight, Fandral squeaked in horror as his pet silently wound its way to the guards, hissing at them, fangs dripping. They ran away, the illusion chasing them. Loki could only imagine his friend was confused. He probably just wanted the ants under their boots.

Daringly, Loki shifted his gaze to Sif who only glared at his snake. “Gross.”

Thor did not seem entirely interested in the illusion, only now they were free. “Let’s go!”

Loki quickly undid the illusion, waiting for the snake to glide back into his hand before following his brother. They dashed through the city, staying clear of wandering guards and roads with horses, running through the markets and parks until they came upon a stretch of farms.

They stopped, panting and adjusting their bags and weapons. Thor gestured across the fields to the wide stretch of planes and hills that father told them held dangers beyond their wildest dreams. “There it is. I bet we can kill a bilgesnipe or three in at least an hour.”

Everything started going downhill from there. They ventured into the forest, Thor thundering ahead of the group, disturbing the area around him. Loki followed timidly in his footsteps. They wandered for hours and found rabbits, pheasants, turtles, and birds of all sorts. But no Bilgesnipe. Eventually, they came upon a clearing where Thor threw his sword angrily to the ground.

“Why can we not find anything?!” His voice echoed around the grassy circle they had come about and he threw himself angrily next to a small stream.

Volstagg was staring sadly into the empty bag that previously held food. “Perhaps we should go back and try again tomorrow.”

“I agree.” Fandral stated, wiping his brow. “It’s too hot.”

Hogun said nothing, kneeling near the stream and rinsing his face in the water. Sif stabbed the ground with her sword. “I say this whole idea was stupid. But we’re already here.”

Thor spat into the grass, jumping up. “You all are cowards! We shall find a bilgesnipe and kill it! It will be our passage into being warriors!”

Loki did not think it was too hot out. Then again, he never really felt overheated at all. But he did think it was best they go home. Mother would not appreciate that they had left the palace when she told them not to. “Thor, mother—”

His brother roared in fury, shoving Loki aside. “Loki you are supposed to be the mischievous one! Yet you do everything mother tells you to do!”

Loki leaned back, his small snake curling up in his palm. “Brother….”

“No! I am the eldest, Loki! And I say we are finding a bilgesnipe! NOW!” he yelled and a flock of birds flew from their trees. A resounding rumbling growl responded from the grove of bushes behind Thor.

All was still. They watched in horror as a scaly beast with six legs and long curved antlers burst through the trees, breathing heavily, head bent and ready to charge. It was at that time Thor chose to shout something useful. “RUN!”
Loki, unfortunately, had made eye contact with the beast upon pulling out his dagger. He was not a skilled swordsman like Fandral, but he could throw his daggers.

The bilgesnipe picked up its first two feet on the right side, kicking up the dirt, preparing to charge. Loki quickly glanced off to the side to find Thor and his friends had run away and were nowhere to be seen. Heart pounding in his chest, Loki did the only logical thing he could have done.

He ran, screaming and clutching his dagger for dear life. He dodged trees, managing not to trip over any roots or stones. But the bilgesnipe seemed thoroughly unimpressed by the trees, squashing everything in its path to Loki.

He turned and nearly hit his head on the tall, flat stone cliff before him.

This is how I will die. I hope mother gives my books to Thor. He would like the ones about adventurers. Loki thought, back pressed against the wall as the bilgesnipe neared. In one final act to protect himself, Loki held up his dagger, took aim and threw it straight into the creature’s eye.

Letting out a fierce snarl, it stopped to violently shake its head, desperately trying to tear the obstruction from its eye. Taking this opportunity, Loki edged along the wall until he saw a little break in the stone. A crevice. Not very tall, nor very wide but large enough for a man to get through and certainly large enough for Loki.

Hastily, Loki made for the tiny den diving inside of it as the bilgesnipe whined in the field. Once safely inside, he sighed with relief, opening up his palm for the little snake to be free. It mouthed his thumb affectionately, staring up at him with large back eyes.

What now?

Loki exhaled noisily, cramping further into his cave until his back pressed against the wall. He wished to be anywhere but where he was. Anywhere in all of Yggdrasil. Even Jotunnheim would be better.

In a sudden swirl of rainbow colored magic, Loki found himself no longer in the cave but instead laying flat on his back under some wooden structure.

He felt a gentle wiggle in his hand, his pet asking for release. Carefully, he opened his palm, letting him go.

Where was he? Certainly not on Asgard. They did not have such strange craftsmanship. Slowly, he moved to look from under the structure, ever more confused by his surroundings. They were not on Vanafheim either. He had been there. Nor were they on Alfheim or Jotunheim or Muspelheim. This didn't look anything like the description in his book about the Nine Realms.

His heart beat faster and faster as there was movement above his head and two small feet dangled off of the edge of the structure. Was he on Midgard?

The feet touched the floor and he watched as they carefully moved to a set of doors against the other wall. From where he lay, Loki saw that the feet were attached to a pair of legs adorned with strange short pants on them. The two doors silently creaked open to reveal clothes suspended by a bar. It was similar to his closet at home. Except his was much bigger.

The feet turned around, treading silently back towards him. He was taking note on how the feet crept, so very similar to how he would sneak around the guards sometimes. His heart stuttered when the feet stopped by the bed and knees hit the ground in front of him. Before he knew it, the face of a young girl was staring at him in triumph, then in disappointment.
“You’re not a monster.” She whispered, not bothering to hide her frustration.

Surprised and relieved, Loki shook his head.

The girl stood up again, walking around her room. “Darius said there was a monster that went and in my closet and under my bed. But you’re just a kid.”

Cautiously, Loki pulled himself from under the structure he supposed was her bed. His bed was not built like that, but he was on a different realm. “My brother told me that there were Jotunns in my bath onetime.”

The girl stopped looking around her room to stare at him. She had wide blue eyes, clear and curious. “What’s a Jotunn?”

He stared back. “You do not know what Frost Giants are?”

“Are they like the abominable snowman from Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer?” she asked, sitting on the edge of her bed that was piled high with purple covers and fake animals.

“What are those?” he asked in turn, eager to know more about this strange girl. “Where am I?”

She looked at him like this was the most obvious thing. “My bedroom.”

“What realm?” he asked as his little snake slithered onto the toe of his boot.

The girl tapped her chin with a small finger. “Well, we live on planet Earth. Did you mean planet? Or state? This is New York.”

“So I am on Midgard!” he said, bending down to look under her bed. He had found a secret passage between worlds!

“You talk funny.” she commented, bending down to look under her bed with him. “Are you from England? My aunt lives in England and my uncle Henry talks like you.”

Loki shook his head, standing up. “I am of Asgard.”

“Huh. I’ve never heard of it. Hey! Is that your pet snake?” she asked, bending down to his shoe.

Shocked that she had not called his friend gross, he bent and picked up the snake, letting it run over his fingers. “Yes. I found him earlier today away from his nest. He’s my friend.”

She stood up too, her face very close to the little snake, it licked her nose. Her giggling reply made Loki feel at ease. “Would you like to hold him?”

The girl nodded, holding out her hand as the little snake slithered into her palm and mouthed her index finger. “What’s his name?”

“He does not have one.”

The girl huffed. “I think his name should be Frank. He looks like a Frank.”

“But that is a ridiculous name. Why would he be named Frank?” he asked her as she stroked the snakes back.

She brought up her other hand to scratch the mess of brown hair on her head. “Well what would you name him?”
Loki thought for a second. “Jörmungandr.”

She stared at him. “That’s a silly name.”

“Is not!”

“Yes it is!” the girl said. “I mean, my friends have weird names sometimes, but...hey, do you want to be my friend?” her blue eyes switched from frustrated to curiosity again in a matter of seconds.

Loki tried never to be flustered. It seemed very common to do so. But he had no idea what to say. He did not think he had many friends. Perhaps Thor when he wasn’t with his friends. Or his mother. “I would very much like to be your friend.”

She smiled, sitting down on her bed. “Cool! Well, I’m Darcy.”

He sat down next to her carefully, unsure if he was allowed to or not. He heard most men weren’t allowed to sit on a lady’s bed. But she didn’t seem to mind. “I am Loki, Prince of Asgard.”

Darcy blinked at him, letting the snake curl up on her knee. “Loki? You’re a prince?”

He nodded suspiciously. Most people knew what Asgard was. But here this girl did not. “What is your status, Darcy?”

She thought about this, as if deciding what the word status meant. “Well, I’m in fifth grade and my mom is a doctor and my daddy is a fireman. When I grow up, I want to be president.”

“A Fire Man?” Loki asked. “Is he of Muspelheim?”

“No, silly goose! He puts out fires with a big hose! You don’t know what a fireman is?” Darcy asked, giggling as Jörmungandr slithered over her toes.

Loki did not understand why you would need a hose to put out a fire. On Asgard they simply used magic. “I see. Darcy?”

“Yeah Loki?”

“What are those?” he asked, pointing to a tub of colorful prisms in the middle of her purple room.

“My Legos. You’ve never played with Legos?” the sound was almost sad.

“We do not have them on Asgard.” He explained, desperately wanting to see what they were.

She picked up Jörmungandr, excitedly standing up to go press a white tab on the wall. As soon as her fingers came in contact, the room flooded with light. He covered his eyes. “You are a sorceress!”

Darcy sat down. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve just done magic! I could not conjure such bright candles!” he exclaimed in a whisper, looking to the ceiling where indeed strange orbs of magic glowed.

“My mom says that light switches are magic too. But I know its electricity.” Darcy said, switching the lights off again. “Those are too bright.”

Loki was so confused yet so interested. “Where can I learn more about this electricity?”
Darcy tapped her chin. “Hmm, I have a book!” she ran to a small white shelf with very skinny books all propped up. “My grandpa gave it to me. He says I won’t learn about it till middle school or high school, but I wanted to know more anyways.”

Quickly he took the book, noticing the words were all in English, the common language of Midgardians. Of course, he spoke it as well as many others. He studied them all in earnest, trying to understand. He skimmed the book taking in all the words as Darcy moved to the tub and began taking out her Legos.

“Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“May I borrow this book? I promise I shall return it.” He asked, setting it down.

Darcy took out a couple of the hard colored blocks and began sticking them together. “Okay. When you finish it, can you explain electricity to me? I still don’t get it.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “I would be very happy to. What are you doing?”

Darcy rubbed her eyes as she stuck the pieces together. “I’m building a house.”

Loki sat down with her, picking up a toy experimentally. “What is it made of?”

“Plastic. Do they have that where you’re from?” she asked, her multicolored box set firmly on the ground.

Loki shook his head, picking out all the green legos. “No.”

“You must be from a weird place if they don’t have plastic. Hey, can I borrow one of your green ones?” she asked, shoving two bits of brown plastic together.

He handed her one and she stuck it to the brown. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He searched through the tub, deciding he wished to build the Palace but was out of green Legos. He picked up a yellow one and changed it to his favorite color. Smiling at his success, Loki did this a few more times, unaware of Darcy’s staring at him. “Woah. How did you do that?”

She abandoned her Legos to take his hand and look at it like it was the most interesting thing in the world. “Magic.”

Darcy’s smile lit up the room. “I knew there was such a thing as magic! You’re like Harry Potter, except you’re in Slytherin and you like snakes and stuff. Can you turn the ones in my house purple?”

Loki nodded at the girl’s enthusiasm. Perhaps his magic was different than the magic on Midgard. Gingerly, he picked up the house, turning them the same color as her bed cover. She took it back, eyes full of wonder. “That’s so cool! Thank you!”

They built things with the Legos for a while longer, Jörmungandr going inside Loki’s palace to curl up. Darcy yawned, standing up and stretching. “Wow. I’m tired. I don’t think I’ve ever stayed up this late before, even on New Year’s Eve with my cousins.”

Together, they took apart the Legos filling the bucket back up and jörmungandr returned to Loki’s
palm. “I suppose I shall try to go back to Asgard now.”

Darcy nodded, her eyes closed like she was ready to fall asleep at any moment. Suddenly, they flicked wide open. “Wait! I have to give you something! And do you know if Frank likes dead flies? Because I have a lot of dead flies.”

Loki shrugged and Darcy went to her window sill where a few dead flies lay. “I keep asking my mom if I can get a pet iguana to eat them, but she says no.”

Jörmungandr, seeming to understand his purpose, left Loki’s hands to go and close his small mouth over a fly. “I think he likes them. So far he has only eaten ants.”

“I got bit by a red ant once. It hurt and my mom put a band-aid on it. But I have something for you!” she said, rushing to a big wooden chest that squeaked when she lifted the lid and she dug around in it for a second. Loki noticed several things inside of it: more toys, books, colorful stones and bits of odd shaped nuts. “Here. I found this yesterday with my friend Avery. I was going to use it in an art project, but I think you should have it.”

He held out his hand as she placed a long white feather in it. “I think it’s either a dove or a seagull feather, but I’m not sure. I think it’s pretty.”

It was an odd gift, Loki thought. But she was right, it was very pretty. “I will treasure it. Thank you very much Darcy.”

“You’re welcome!” she said, not hesitating to wrap her arms around his body in a tight embrace. He was so surprised that he didn’t hug her back. As far as he knew, no Lady showed a man this affection unless they were his wife or mother or sister. Occasionally his mother hugged him, but not so casually.

With that she went to her bed, jumping into it before scrambling under the sheets. “Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

“Can you come and visit me again? Maybe that way I can show you my other books and we can play monopoly. My brother won’t play it with me because he says I’m boring.”

Loki did not understand what this game was, but found himself very much wanting to meet his friend again. “I would love to.”

“Awesome.” She said, rolling over. “G’night.”

Kneeling down with his feather and her book, he shuffled under the bed. “Goodnight Darcy.”

Then, Loki wished to be back on Asgard so he could go to his room and write with the feather from his new friend and read the book she had lent him. In another rush of rainbow colored magic he found his back against the stone wall of his cave, bright sunlight pouring through the crack which he had entered.

Loki stood, shimmying out of his cave. He looked down at the book. Should he tell someone that he had been to Midgard? His father must not have known about the small passageway. But what if Thor found out? What if Thor found out and he met Darcy and Darcy wished to be Thor’s friend instead of his? Thor already had so many friends.

No. He wouldn’t tell anyone. He and Darcy could be friends and they could play games and nobody was going to make her think he was strange or different.
The sky was darkening and Loki figured he had better start looking for Thor. His mother would be disappointed if he did not look out for his brother. Carefully, Loki began retracing their steps, following the broken path of trees the bilgsnipe had left till he got to the clearing.

But there was no Thor. He kept searching, walking around into the denser wood until he was sure they had all just gone back to the palace without him. Then he heard voices.

“Honestly, father! Loki was eaten by a bilgesnipe! We saw it run after him! It’s been hours!” said Thor. “I say we hunt down every beast on Asgard and murder them for what they’ve done!”

Quickly, Loki looked down at his book whispering a spell so it shrunk and he could place it in his pocket.

“Quiet Thor! The bilgesnipe has not eaten Loki. We gutted it and the only thing of Loki’s we found was his dagger in the eye.” Came the rough voice of his father.

“Father? Thor?” Loki asked, peering from around a tree.

They both turned to find an immaculate and unscathed Loki. “Loki! You’re not dead! Mother would have killed me!”

Loki smiled rushing over to his brother and father. “I’m sorry. I could not fight off the bilgesnipe anymore after my dagger had been lost. So I hid from it then came to find you.”

“Don’t be sorry! You nearly killed it! The beast could hardly move when we found it! Then father came in…” Thor looked like he wanted to say something else, but Odin stared at him harshly.

“Thor Odinson, I have told you before and I will tell you again, if your wish is to hunt then wait until I or the guards take you! Do not lead a group of your friends into such dangerous situations!”

Thor waved his hands around. “But Father it was fine! We could have managed it had Loki not run off! Then it followed him!”

The Allfather’s scowl deepened. “Perhaps if you had known more about them before you go charging into their nests. The mother is now dead and her children will die now as well. Loki was wrong to follow you, but he fought well. For that I must be thankful. He fought to save his life, not because he wished to kill.”

Loki looked down at the toes of his boots, uncomfortable with the praise. It was not often that Odin gave any inclination that he was better than Thor.

“Yes Father.” Thor agreed, him too looking at his boots in discomfort.


That night, after being taken home on Odin’s horse and feasting in the hall, Loki retired to his room, setting Jörmungandr down on his desk along with his feather and book which he enlarged once more. He looked down at the little snake. “Midgard is strange, don’t you think?”

Jörmungandr only mouthed his pinky in response.

Tired, Loki put the book on his shelf to read later and shed his boots and coat, throwing his body face down in bed. There was a knock at his door, “Enter.”

Loki sat up, expecting to see his valet or perhaps his nurse, but it was his mother. “Well haven’t
you had a long day today?”

He nodded as she walked up to his bed, sitting on the covers. “I was scared for you Loki. When the guards came to the palace to tell your father that you and your brother were gone I cursed myself a thousand times over for ever teaching either of you anything.”

Frowning, Loki reached out and took her hand. He truly hated to see his mother upset. “I’m sorry mother. But I remembered what you told me about keeping Thor safe. So I went with him.”

With a soft smile she stroked his cheek. “You’re too kind, Loki. Who is your friend?”

Loki’s heart stopped for a second, as he thought she meant Darcy. But he came to his senses as the little snake curled onto his hand. “jörmungandr.”

His pet slithered to Frigga, tongue flicking her finger affectionately. “He is sweet. Whatever you have done for him, Loki. He very much likes you.”

Loki smiled at this as jörmungandr returned to his pillow. “Mother? What do you know of Midgard?”

Her blonde brow crinkled, “Why do you ask?”

“Because I have no books that talk about Midgard as it is today. I wish to know. Father says that a good king will always try to know as much as he can to understand the people.” He explained. It was not the entire truth.

His mother sat back on his pillows, setting her hands in his lap. “Well, let’s see. Magic on Midgard is different. On Asgard we have such a vast understanding of its workings and how to control it that many can study it with ease. On Midgard, magic comes in the form of something called science. It has taken them years to make of it what they have now.”

Loki frowned. “Do Midgardians know of the rest of the realms and their magic? Why have they not learned from us?”

Frigga laughed, kissing his forehead. “Loki, you are too smart for your age. Midgard doesn’t know of Yggdrasil, and learning magic from Asgardians would tip their world indelicately. Of course, it is a subject open to controversy. Perhaps you should figure it out yourself. I shall try to find you some books on Midgard, alright?”

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“Thank you mother.” He said, nodding and falling back on his pillows. “I shall see you tomorrow then.”

“Yes. Sleep well, Darling.”

Loki fell asleep on the thoughts of reading Darcy’s book tomorrow and finding out how to get back to Midgard. He would see his friend again even if it meant throwing every dagger in Asgard at Bilgesnipe.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello, everybody, thank you for reading the first chapter to There's A God Under My Bed. :)
I fully intend to make this story a long one. I'm going to go through all the years of their lives and make their friendship grow. This story will also stick to canon. Pure head canon shit right here. Unless I change my mind and it turns out not to be canon anymore.

Also, I'm breaking all the rules of the age thing here. Trust me, it will be explained and the way I've decided to do this is sketchy but it makes my story work.

Because I am a semi-busy person sometimes, I don't know exactly how frequently I'll be posting. However, time between updates shouldn't usually be more than a week. I hope you enjoy this fic, I'm looking forwards to it. Comment if you like, but I suppose you don't have to cuz it's only the first chapter.
Frank Eats Grasshoppers

Chapter Summary

Exactly what the title says

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy shoved a spoonful of Fruit-Loops in her mouth before speaking. “…And then he turned my Legos green and purple!”

Mrs. Lewis smiled, wiping a bit of milk off her daughter’s chin. “Well, it seems you’ve made quite the imaginary friend there!”

“Mom! He’s not imaginary! He’s from Asgard and he has a pet snake named Frank who likes dead flies and he’s magical!”

“Okay, honey. Are you doing anything today?” Mrs. Lewis asked her daughter, putting away the milk. “You’ve only got a few days left before school starts.”

Darcy made a face. “I’m going to go hunting for grasshoppers with Darius after I wake him up.”

“Let your brother sleep Darcy. He probably will not appreciate you going to wake him up.”

“But Mom…” Darcy complained, waving around her spoon, getting milk in her messy hair.

Mrs. Lewis gave her a stern look. “Leave your brother alone and comb your hair or I’ll do it for you.”

Defiantly, Darcy dropped her spoon in her cereal, clutching her head, “NEVER!”

“DARCY!” Mrs. Lewis shouted after her daughter, but she was already giggling and out the front door, gone to play.

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Loki sat at the table in the hall next to Thor who was staring stonily at his eggs. “What is wrong, brother?”

Thor pushed away his food, setting his chin on the table. “Father has said I cannot play with any of my friends today as punishment.”

He pressed his lips together, pushing away his plate as well. “I have a couple books about bettering technique and adventuring if you want to—“

“Go away Loki. You don’t understand.” Thor said, standing up and crossing his arms. Loki watched him.

“I could try.”
Sighing, Thor sat down again, taking a bite of egg. “I always get punished because I am the eldest. You did not get punishment for creating that illusion!”

Loki frowned, offering a bit of cheese to jörmungandr. The little snake took it with vigor. “Perhaps Father wishes to—“

“To what!?” Thor asked, angrily biting a slice of bread. “Make me more like you? I doubt it!”

Swallowing, Loki looked down at jörmungandr who nipped at the fork with interest. “I doubt Father wants you to be more like me.” Loki muttered, “But maybe he wishes for you to learn a bit more about the world. He said that a King should spend as much time studying the world as he does training to defend it.”

Thor rolled his eyes. “When I am King, I shall not make such ridiculous sayings.”

He wanted to argue, and tell him that Father meant well, but he guessed Thor wished to be alone. “It is your choice.” Excusing himself like mother taught him, Loki stood from the table, taking his friend in hand.

Loki retreated to his room, going to his bookshelf and pulling out the book on electricity. He sat at his desk with a quill and ink, taking notes on everything he read on a separate sheet of parchment. He learned of things called electrons and protons and atoms and molecules. He learned of currents and a man named Newton. But it did not explain everything. It did not explain how a light switch related to magic. And he desperately wished to explain electricity to Darcy.

Caught up in his curiosities, Loki visited the library and was greeted by Lady Asta. “Good morn, Prince Loki. Do you need help finding anything today?”

He shook his head, “No thank you, Lady Asta.”

She smiled kindly at him before he continued on his way to the section of the archives that held things on magic. He searched the titles, pouring over tomes and written works, finding nothing. Though, he did learn a few new spells that involved making yourself invisible to the ears and eyes as well as the rest of your senses. He wondered if such spells could be combined and modified so that even Heimdall could not see you.

He wrote it in his planning book to practice later. Mother said he should always write down good ideas. He went back to attempting to find things on Midgardian science when someone cleared their throat.

Loki glanced up to see Sif dressed in her armor and her face set in that grim look she wore around him. “The guards at the armory wished that I deliver Prince Loki his new dagger as he has lost the other on a bilgesnipe.”

In her hand she held out a brand new dagger, a serpent inlaid in the handle. He accepted it. “Thank you Sif.”

She huffed, bending over his shoulder to see what he was reading. “You do realize that magic is for women, right?”

Loki turned red. How could he forget? Everyone reminded him. But Sif should know…she wished to be a warrior and they were usually male. He chose to speak with elegance, “One should not base their assertions upon the uncertainties of those around them. I know that when I find something different than it should be, I do not shun it. I study it.” Loki said, waiting for Sif to apologize.
She only glared more. “Watch your tongue, Loki. Or an opponent you have bested with it may cut it out with your own dagger.”

With that she stalked away and Loki went back to his reading. Not a minute later, his mother was there. “Loki, look at you, inside on a day like today.”

“Good morning, Mother.” He greeted, looking up from his reading, eyes flying to the books in her hands.

She chuckled setting them down on his table. “I asked one of my Ladies to take a trip to Midgard and obtain some books on their science. She got you these.”

Loki gaped, feeling the covers of the books. “Thank you mother. This is most helpful.”

He opened the page of the first book entitled Physics. Physics...he liked the sound of that. It was like magic, but different. Without another moment’s hesitation, he dove into the book, taking notes and reading until he was sure he knew exactly what electricity was and how he related it to magic. Quickly, he wrote it down.

Darcy would be so pleased!

“Jörmungandr, come! Let us put away my books, and then we can go practice fighting. I think Thor would feel better if he got to teach me something.” Loki said as his pet leapt onto his hand, putting his mouth on Loki’s knuckle.

He ran to his room, standing up on a chair to put the books on his shelf. He would read them all later when he had more time. For now, he must learn to better fight bilgesnipe so he could go see Darcy. He ran to Thor’s room, gently knocking on his door. “Enter!”

Loki pushed in, finding Thor swinging a sword at an invisible enemy. “Loki? What is it?”

“I was wondering if you might like to go practice sparring in the fields. I am in need of it.”

Thor scoffed, “Yeah, you are.” He said, tossing his sword aside. “Okay. Let’s go.”

They walked out together, Thor talking about the different styles he was practicing while Loki listened. “I read a book once that said in swordsmanship, you should pretend that you are walking on clouds and that your enemy is as wispy as the wind.”

“And that is why I do not read.” Thor said, laughing to himself. “Finesse is for those who dally. When I conquer, I wish to do so with finality!”

Loki nodded, tapping his chin like Darcy had. “Perhaps you should try a hammer. They show strength as well as destruction.”

Thor smiled to this. “Loki! That is a brilliant idea! I should tell father.”

He felt a surge of pride as they reached the rink. Thor picked up two of the smaller swords from the rack of practice weapons. “For now we practice with blades. And no magic!”

Loki agreed, holding himself in proper stance. Sparring with Thor was brutal but enjoyable work. Loki sought to master some form of fighting technique as he struggled with more offensive weapons. He was decent with a bow and great with daggers, but swords and maces and axes felt too heavy in his hands.
“Hold your arms up, Loki! Or I should cut them off at the wrist!” Thor warned, crashing his blade against Loki’s.

They fought for a long while, Thor besting Loki most times, but Loki managing the occasional slick save. Eventually, Thor claimed to be bored of fighting and set down his sword. “You’re getting better, brother. You just need to be more offensive. You cannot land a blow if you never open up to take one.”

Loki had the urge to write that down, but did not want to risk criticism. Jörmungandr slithered onto his shoe, holding a small stick in his mouth. Loki picked up the snake and removed the twig. Jörmungandr looked down at it, disappointed.

“I am going back to the palace for lunch, are you coming Loki?” Thor asked, giving his brother a light punch on the shoulder.

Loki shook his head. “I think I’m going to go for a walk in the gardens.”

“Suit yourself.” Thor shrugged, walking away.

Loki waited until Thor was well out of sight before closing his hand around Jörmungandr and running towards the gardens. There, he knelt, hidden, behind a tree. He reached into his pockets, pulling out the paper that included his notes on electricity and his book of important things. He opened it, checking for the spell that turned you invisible. He smiled, casting it over himself and Jörmungandr.

Loki ran to the gate, easily moving past the guards, through the city, across the farms, and into the forest. There, he removed the spell, grinning to himself. Now all he had to do was follow Thor’s steps from yesterday and he should find the clearing. Just to be sure he would not be lost, he took out his dagger and cut an ‘x’ every third tree he passed. But all very small so that he would not hurt the trees too badly.

Fortunately he had no trouble finding the small clearing and from there, he followed the trampled path of the bilgesnipe to the tall stone cliff. Jörmungandr wiggled excitedly and Loki understood his enthusiasm. They would see their friend.

Eagerly, Loki went to the cave, crawling inside and resting his back against the wall. He wished to be in Midgard with his friend, Darcy, so he could show her about electricity. In a shower of rainbow light, he was back under Darcy’s bed, only light poured though the window, dimming in the evening.

He pulled himself out from under the structure, not seeing her anywhere. Politely, he chose to sit on her bed and wait, examining the fake animals. There were some horses, all with only four legs. Some tortoises, bird, and dogs were all stacked up on the side of her bed.

A thundering ruckus seemed to reverberate through the room and in hardly any time at all, a young girl with dripping wet hair in a white shirt and short pants entered the room, shutting the door behind her. “Loki! I didn’t know when you were going to be here, so I was playing in the water.”

He nodded at her dripping wet body, “Would you like assistance in getting dry?”

Darcy laughed, shaking her head. “No. I can dress myself Loki. Gosh.” She walked over to a cabinet of sorts with drawers, pulling them open and pulling out a new set of short pants and another shirt, this one was purple. “I’ll be back.”

She ran from the room, appearing seconds later in dry clothes and a brush in her hands. “Have you
figured out electricity yet?”

Loki nodded enthusiastically as she sat down next to him, attempting to run the brush through her hair. He explained it to her, making sure she understood every bit before he moved on to the next part. He also pulled her book from his pocket, enlarging it for her.

“Woah. That makes so much sense now. With all the electrons and protons and current and stuff.” She said, the brush stuck in her hair as she went to turn the light switch in her room on and off. “Cool.”

Loki nodded, “It is cool. Midgardian science is just like magic, except, for some reason, Midgardians need machines to work their science. It is odd.”

Darcy yanked on her brush, trying to pull it through her hair. “Can you make electricity?”

Loki thought about it for a second before holding up his hands and a little ball of bright white and blue sparkling light stayed in a contained little ball. “I think so. I’m not sure.”

“That’s so awesome, Loki! I wish I had magic so I would never have to do my hair again.” Darcy sighed. “Hey, I know you’re a boy and everything, but can you help me brush my hair. I haven’t done it for three days and if it’s not done when my mom gets home, she’s going to do it.” She explained.

Loki cocked his head to the side. “I’ve never combed anyone’s hair before.” He commented as she turned her back to him so he could look at the wet clumpy locks.

“Just take the brush and try and get all the tangles out.” Darcy said, crossing her legs.

Timidly and not wishing to make any mistakes, Loki began trying to separate her knots with the brush, bringing it through her hair with gentleness. He started at the bottom, making sure every little matt of hair was combed out before moving up. Soon, he could brush through all of it, from scalp to end. “I think that is done.”

Darcy jumped up, running to the mirror on the back of her door, smiling at the dark hair that went down to her waist. “Loki! You did it!”

He smiled, pleased to have made her happy. It was very easy to do. And Loki thought she looked very nice with her hair done. “You said something yesterday about a game. Would you still like to play it?”

“Oh course!” she said, running to the other side of the room and pulling out a long box. She sat on the ground with it and opened the top. “Who would you like to be?”

Loki looked down at his options, confused by the assortment of small objects. He recognized a shoe and a rocking horse, a thimble, and a cannon? “I call dibs on the car. I’m always the car.”

Darcy sat and read the rules to him and Loki was pretty sure he understood. “So, I am trying to cheat you out of all your money?”

“Yep.” She nodded, dealing out money. “Do you cheat when you play games?”

Loki shook his head. “I do not play many games in which to cheat.”

Darcy gave him a small impish smile, holding up the dice. “Can you keep a secret?”
His heart thudded. This girl trusted him with her secrets? He would gladly keep them. “Of course.”

She giggled, “I always cheat. I don’t cheat on tests or anything, but cheating in games is just too much fun! Especially if no one knows you’re cheating.”

It was a funny sentiment. “But why would I want to play with you if you are going to cheat?” Loki asked.

Darcy tapped her chin. “You have to cheat too. Then it’ll be fair.”

Loki nodded, determined to cheat as best he could. They played this game, Monopoly. Darcy always gave herself an extra one-hundred when she passed go and Loki only paid her two-hundred dollars for the Boardwalk. Nearing the end of the game, they both had a surplus of fake money and the bank was empty. Darcy determined it a ‘Cat Game’. “You’re fun to play games with Loki. What do you like to do on Asgard?”

“I like to read. And practice fighting with my brother.” He answered, helping her put the game away.

“Fight? Like with your fists?” she asked, holding up her small fists.

Loki finished stowing away all his money, shaking his head. “Well, Thor, my brother, likes to fight with swords and bigger weapons. But I like to use daggers.” He said, pulling out his weapon from the belt at his side. Jörmungandr slid over the handle.

Darcy’s eyes widened. “Your parents let you carry around knives?”

“It is to protect myself. Thor may get a hammer soon. He seemed eager about it.”

“Wow.” She said, awestruck, “My parents won’t even let me cut up apples. What else do you do?”

Loki thought, “I enjoy reading.”

She clapped her hands together, rushing to her white bookshelf. On it, Loki read the titles of books he did not recognize. “I like to read a lot of fact books. I like one’s with pictures in them so I can see the stuff they’re talking about. But sometimes I read ones without pictures. My mom says it’s good for me. But I read some stories too. Fiction. What do you read?”

Loki knelt by her bookshelf, examining her books. “I like all kinds of books. I like ones that tell me how to do things the best. To learn how to make something or cast spells. But I like stories as well.”

Darcy ran her hand over a row of books, stopping at a beaten, worn looking one. Lady Asta would say it was a well loved book. “This is my favorite. *A Wrinkle in Time.*” She held it out to him. “You should read it. A girl travels to new and different alien places and stuff. It’s really cool.”

Loki smiled, accepting the book. “Thank you Darcy, for sharing your favorite book with me.”

Her smile lit up the room and Loki noticed a missing tooth further back in her mouth. “Friends share their books. Just make sure it doesn’t get hurt. I love it.”

Loki nodded in promise as Darcy picked up the Monopoly box and stuck it back on a shelf. She stopped to look at him. “How tall are you Loki?”

“I am not sure.”
She took his hand, dragging him over to the mirror on the back of her door. “You’re taller than me!”

Loki looked down at the little girl. “I suppose I am.”

“I hate being short. My mom says that girls usually grow faster than boys, but all the boys in my class are taller than me.” She complained with a sigh, pushing her wavy hair from her face.

Loki knew what it was like to feel short. Thor had always been taller than him. “There is nothing wrong with being short.”

“Yeah, I guess.” she said grumpily. “My mom says I’m going to be short. But I kinda want to be big, you know. I want to be some great big ol’ important person that can explain electricity. Like you!” Darcy said, her tone cheering.

She stood on her toes, looking at their reflection in the mirror. “There. Now we’re about the same height.”

“You think I’m important?” Loki asked curiously.

“Well duh! You’re the Prince of Asgard and you’re tall and you read like I do and you have a pet snake!” she assured as if these were the only things in the world that made a person important. Jörmungandr slithered from his shoulder to hers, licking her ear.

“Frank!” she cried, taking the snake in her hand. He cocked his head at her in question. “I have something for you. Hold on!”

She put the animal back on Loki’s shoulder and they waited as Darcy sped from her room, running through her house and coming back up in a breathless pant. “I went out grasshopper hunting with my brother today and he didn’t want to go but I told him we had to because Daddy said if we found grasshoppers he could make grasshopper legs And I’ve never tried any. But he came home and made them for lunch and I didn’t like it. SO I thought that Frank would.”

Jörmungandr went to Darcy’s hand as she tore off a chunk of something cooked and held it to him. He accepted it graciously, immediately going for more. “Woah, you must like grasshopper.”

Loki smiled, thinking that he really liked his friend Darcy. He wished to know more about her. “What do you like to do Darcy?”

The question seemed to make her day as she went to her bed and sat down, contemplating the question. “Well, I don’t like doing my hair. I like going to school but sometimes there are mean people there. They make fun of my glasses so I don’t wear them a lot. I like seeing my friends and playing outside and riding my bike.”

“Do you have many friends?” Loki asked, sure this girl would have tons.

She shrugged. “I do sometimes. But my best friend, Jamie, she moved to Oklahoma in the spring. I asked my mom if I could go with her, but she said no.”

“My condolences on the loss of your friend.”

Darcy finished feeding Jörmungandr, bumping his shoulder with hers. “Hey! You know what they say! Now I can make more friends! Like you and Frank!” she said and the little snake put his entire toothless mouth over her thumb.
Loki smiled, warmed by her apparent affection. “What is this school?”

She blinked at him. “You don’t have schools on Asgard?”

“No. We do. But I think they may be different.” He explained his question and Darcy went to her bookshelf to pull out a long skinny paper book.

“This is my yearbook from last year. Schools on Earth are like big buildings where kids go to learn stuff. My mom says you go to school until your seventeen, then you go to college which is hard and costs a lot of money.”

Loki was surprised by the young ages that people went to school. On Asgard, aging worked differently. For the first couple thousand years of your life, you were a child. You learned to live small on little strength and capabilities so you could know the joys of being young and the values of being weak. Then, over a period of about ten years, you grew quickly through a short adolescence and into adulthood. Thor had reached this stage last year and Loki was soon approaching.

He knew that Midgardians were mortal and could not live long like the Aesir. But how old did they live to? A thousand? Two thousand?

“Do you not go to school?” Darcy asked, picking up one of her fake animals and holding it under her arm.

Loki shook his head. “No. There are schools of magic and such, but you must be older to attend. I occasionally have a tutor or my mother would teach me things. But most of the things I know I learned from reading.”

“Man,” Darcy sighed falling back on her animals. “I wish my parents let me do that.”

He remembered something she said. “Darcy, what are glasses?”

She sat up, “No one on Asgard needs glasses either?”

“I do not know what they are.”

If he had ever seen Darcy look timid, it was now. “Don’t laugh. Okay?”

“I swear, I shall not.” He promised, placing his fist over his heart.

“Pinky promise.” She held out her smallest finger to him. Jörmungandr put his mouth on it. “Link your pinky around mine.” She directed, taking his hand and putting their fingers together.

“Pinky promise?”

Satisfied, she opened a little drawer next to her bed and pulled out a case. Inside were two glass panes stuck in dark frames. She put them on her face, over her eyes. “I can’t see very well. I have to wear them in school because of how bad it is. My mom says I can get contacts when I’m older.”

Loki tilted his head in attempt to better see her face. “I do not see why you should be so upset with them Darcy. If they help you to see, then what is wrong?”

She turned to look at him and he saw nothing out of the ordinary but the glasses on her face. They did not look bad. Loki thought they even made her look…more settled somehow. More at ease.

“Peter Mc Man makes fun of them sometimes. He says my head is too big for my body. So I told
him my head was holding a brain. He started to beat me up so I punched him in the nose. Then I had to go home for the day.”

Loki smiled at her. “Well, perhaps he jests because his name is so odd. And it was very unbecoming of him to attack a lady.”

She stuck out her tongue. “I don’t know. I think that rule is stupid.”

“Which rule?”

“Don’t hit girls. If boys can’t hit girls, then girls can just beat up boys! And that isn’t fair! We should all be able to hit each other!” Darcy huffed, standing up.

It was a fair argument. “You remind me of my brother’s friend, Sif. She wishes to be a warrior instead of a lady.”

Darcy nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! I think that things like that are stupid! My friend Jeremy liked to play with dolls when we were younger, but then he got teased about being a girl. But there was nothing wrong with it! I think people should just do whatever they want to do and not be teased or beat up.” She thought for a second. “Sometimes I feel kinda different, but I guess, I like it sometimes. So being different isn’t bad.”

Loki decided that Darcy was now his most trusted friend. She understood how he felt! “You are very smart Darcy.”

She blushed, taking off her glasses. “Thank you. Do you want to—“

“DARCY, DARIUS, I’M HOME!” shouted a very pretty voice.

Darcy’s hands flew to her hair, “Oh grapefruits! That’s my mom! Loki, you’re my secret friend! Like, no one can know about you. You’re a boy and if Darius finds out he’ll try to make you his friend and not mine!”

“You’re my secret friend too.” He said, standing up.

Darcy waved her hands frantically. “Awesome! But I’ll see you later, okay? Promise me you’ll come back.”

“I promise, Darcy.” He said, holding out his pinky.

Darcy’s ear to ear grin made him glow with happiness. “pinky promise.” She linked their fingers and Jörmungandr slithered across them and onto Loki’s hand as he climbed under the bed with his borrowed book and a blissful smile.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, I'll admit it: I was going to wait for Worlds Apart to be finished before I posted another chapter. But when I started writing this story, I wrote a lot of it. So, Worlds Apart is in no way over and expect regular updates from both since I obviously can't handle just one fanfiction at a time.
I love that people love this! The idea of Loki and Darcy as troublesome childhood besties makes me so happy.

Baby Tasertricks = Cool

Thank you all for your responses and kudos and stuff. If anyone has any kiddie moments that they think would be fun for me to write, go ahead and say it and I'll seriously try to include ideas and stuff. There is a story I intend on following, but there are open spaces for things to happen in.

I sincerely love writing these silly fics and I'm glad you're enjoying them! I love you all and just so you know, this is an accurate depiction of me when I get comments:
Frank Tries Blue Moon

Chapter Summary

Loki gets some freedom, Darcy's too hyper for karate, Frank tries ice cream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki arrived back at the palace late. It was the middle of their evening meal when he sat down, exhausted and began eating as much as he could.

Thor looked over at him. “Why do you eat like a starving man, Loki?”

He swallowed, having run home all the way from the forest. It had taken him three hours. The shortest route to the cave by foot took three hours to get there. He needed a better mode of transportation if he was to continue going. “I am hungry. I missed the midday meal.”

Lady Dagney raised a brow at him, but said nothing. All of his mother’s ladies often liked to tease Loki, most affectionately, about his studious habits and how time got away from him. He found their jests endearing. He blushed and drank deeply from his goblet of water.

Jörmungandr slithered onto the table to eat crumbs of bread, though he was not quite as hungry as Loki because Darcy had fed him earlier. Thor made a sound of disgust at his brother’s friend. “Loki, get it off the table. It’s dirty.”

Loki tried not to feel hurt as he looked from his brother’s dirty fingernails and sweaty palms to Jörmungandr’s sleek scales. “He is not hurting anything.”

“He’s hurting my appetite.” Thor complained, taking a bite of roast quail none the less.

In defense of his friend, Loki chose to move to a different seat at the end of the table where Thor would not be displeased with him. There, Loki quietly assured the little snake. “You’re not dirty, Jörmungandr. You’re just different. Like Darcy said, different doesn’t mean bad.”

The little snake did not seem troubled about his difference, licking at a droplet of water that had settled on the table.

That night, after his bath, Loki sat in bed, reading the book Darcy had given him. He found that he could not put it down. It was a truly enthralling story. He must ask her questions about it!

The Black Thing, it was so evil. The personification of evil! And the sacrificed star, Mrs. Whatsit made him smile along with her friends Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which.

But the most interesting thing was this tesseract. A tesseract! He had heard of one before when skimming through a book on arithmetic structures of curiosity. But this seemed a whole new idea! That a tesseract could travel through dimensions…like realms? Was the bifrost a tesseract of sorts? Or vice versa? He must learn more.

Loki put down the book, its pages loved by him as well as Darcy.
Darius pushed his sister aside on his way to the kitchen. “You’re so slow.”

Darcy pouted, crossing her arms. “You could have just asked. I would have moved.”

She sighed making her way to the kitchen for lunch. It had been thunder storming all day and she wished Loki was there. He was so interesting and he always listened to her talk. None of her friends liked to talk so much but she loved to talk. And she liked to listen. Loki was smart too. He could explain things to her in ways that made it easy.

But the best part was that he seemed to really like listening to what she had to say. Sometimes if she talked to her mom, she could say anything she wanted.

“Mom?”

“Hm.”

“Darius pushed me down the stairs.”

“Okay.”

“My friend has magic superpowers.”

“That’s nice.”

“I have a pet snake.”

“Honey, Mama’s trying to pay taxes. Can you go somewhere else to play?”

***

Loki rubbed eyes. He had been in the library since early this morning and had found a lot of information on the tesseract, though different realms tended to describe it differently. Mathematically, a tesseract was a cube of sorts with a different geometric structure.

Asgardian legend claimed that the tesseract was an actual object that could work as a way to shorten the distance between realms. Much like the bifrost. He looked back to the book *A Winkle in Time*. “A line is not the shortest distance between two points.”

He sighed, Jörmungandr slithering onto his hand. He was getting a little bigger, his body was now the length of Loki’s middle finger. “I think I am beginning to understand this. I only wish I had a model of sorts.”

“Who are you talking to?” asked a smooth, comforting voice.

Loki’s gaze shot up to a girl with long blonde hair and blue eyes. He recognized her as a daughter as one of his mother’s ladies. She was beautiful. Like Darcy. Only her smile was shy and unsure. He quickly came up with a response, not wanting to appear surprised. “My friend.”

The girl looked into his hand and saw the little snake. “Why isn’t it hurting you?”

“He does not wish to. Plus he has no teeth yet.”

“Oh.” She said, clasping her hands behind her back. “Forgive me, Prince Loki.”

***
“It is no trouble Lady…?”

“Sigyn.” She said, meeting his eyes. “The Allmother sent me to give you this book.” In her hands she held a large book with English print.

He held his hands out in acceptance and read the cover. *Human Biology*. Perfect. “Thank you, Lady Sigyn. Have you read it?”

“No, Prince Loki.” She responded, reddening further. “I cannot read any midgardian languages.”

Loki nodded easily. It was not common that Asgardians learn all the languages. He was royalty, and hence the exception. “I understand. Would you like to learn?”

Sigyn opened her mouth to say something, lights in her eyes when a loud voice made her jump. “Lady Sigyn!”

Fandral strutted into view, a willowy look on his face. “I thought you were going to the afternoon sparring to watch me pummel Prince Thor.”

She nodded, looking down at her toes. “Indeed. The Allmother gave me a task.”

“Ah.” Fandral said in a pitying tone, eyes flicking to Loki and back to her. “Well, it seems your task is completed.” He offered her his arm and she took it, not glancing back at Loki.

“Good day Prince Loki.” She muttered, walking away.

He waited till they were gone to open up his new book and tried to compose himself. Why could he not make any friends on Asgard? Was it because of his hair? He was not blonde like his mother or Thor. Or maybe his eyes. Were they too green? Was it because he was small? He thought of Darcy in her glasses. Maybe he should express his concerns to her. She did not shy away from him as others did. She hugged him.

Reading for ten minutes, he found that mortal life expectancy was only 60-90 years. Less than a century.

He swallowed. That was how long Darcy would live? Only 70 years? Thor had been friends with Sif for at least a thousand! How was that fair that he should only get a friend for 70 years before she died? She said she was nine. Her life was already over 10% finished! He had at least a few thousand more years to go before he could choose to be immortal or not.

Angrily he snapped the book closed and Jörmungandr curled up on his hand comfortingly. Jörmungandr did not care if he had green eyes and dark hair. Jörmungandr did not care if he was small and liked magic and reading. Neither did Darcy. Darcy thought he was important.

Calming down, Loki picked up his notes and books, leaving a few of them on the table to read later and taking his back to his chambers. There he added them to his shelf, standing on a chair to reach the highest shelf. From there, he shrunk Darcy’s book down so it could fit in his pocket. He decided it was time to speak with his father about gaining freedoms. He was almost at his time to begin the transition into adulthood and felt that he should have access to a horse and passage out of the city.

Gently, he walked through the halls until he came to the throne room, where Odin stood speaking with a group of nobles. He waited by the door till they dispersed before approaching the Allfather.

“Father.” He said, nearing the throne, trying to keep up a mature demeanor. He was a prince, he
should speak with grace as well as purpose.

“What is it you need, my son? I suppose it is something to do with getting a new weapon as Thor has been given Mjolnir?” Odin asked, a glint in his eye.

Loki raised his brows in shock. He had not known that Thor had gotten his hammer. And Mjolnir was a fine weapon indeed. “No Father. I was here to ask your permission for my desired endeavors.”

“For once.” Odin added, chuckling and beckoning for Loki to approach the throne.

Loki tried not to run, willing to prove his maturity and the responsibility he possessed. “What is it that you wish, Loki?” he asked, taking his son’s hand.

“I wish to have permission to travel into the forests again. I do not wish to kill things, only to discover. I’ve learned so much from books, but I have not truly gone out to test if what I’m reading is all right.” Loki explained, voicing the truth in the form of a lie.

Odin sighed, a sad smile on his face. Loki feared that he would not get permission until Odin laughed. “If you were Thor, I would say no.” he chuckled, taking both his son’s hands and leaning forward to speak in hushed tones to him. “But you are very intelligent, Loki. I will have a guard escort you to the stables and tell them that Prince Loki is to have free reign of his own horse and allowed his freedoms.”

Loki could not hold back the smile. “Thank you Father.”

“You’re welcome, Son.” He said, sitting back in his chair. “Make sure you are armed with more than one dagger, if that is your weapon of choice and ask if you are to stay gone longer than a day’s time.”

Loki nodded respectfully, turning to leave when Odin called to him. “And Loki, do not tell your brother. He would be most furious.”

“Yes Father.”

The next thing he knew, Loki and Jörmungandr were sitting on a fine steed he named Hel. She was quite old and was the possessor of one of Loki’s earlier spell malfunctions. She had broken her leg after racing too much with other horses and Loki, being her master, had tried to heal it with magic. Well, it didn’t exactly heal her per say. It actually killed her and Loki had cried all night at his mistake. But when the stable boys went in the next day, they found that Hel was only half dead, one side of her body entirely skeletal while the other full functioning blood and flesh.

Hel was not very well accepted on Asgard, though. She ran faster than most and could only carry a little weight. So she spent most of her time on Nilfheim. But it felt wrong to abandon his pet, especially since it was he that put her in such a condition.

“Let’s go, Hel.” Loki said, patting her fleshy side affectionately.

In no time at all, they were through the city and past the fields, dashing through the forest. Jörmungandr sat in Loki’s pocket, head poking out and tongue blowing in the wind. Loki didn’t want to risk hurting Hel by taking her through the thicker wood, so he made a detour, taking grassier planes across the land to reach the hills. One of which contained his cliff and the cave.

Hel listened to his direction, trotting along through a patch of worn shrubs before approaching the passage to Midgard. He dismounted, sliding off Hel with a little uncertainty. She was very fast, but
also much bigger than her small prince rider.

“Hel, I’m going to be seeing Darcy for a while. We might not head back to the palace till morning. Stay by the river or nearby. Try not to fight any bilgesnipe.” Loki said, rubbing both the smooth bone of her shoulder and the silky mane that poured down one side of her head.

She neighed, gleefully stomping her hooves and bumping his head with her nose. He took that as encouragement to go. Eagerly, with Jörmungandr’s head poking out of his pocket, Loki dove into the cave, laying down on his back. Midgard, Midgard, Midgard….

“Daddy, can I stay up a little longer to read? Please?” pleaded a girl’s voice.

“Darcy, you have school tomorrow….”

“Pleeeeeeesease?”

“Sweetheart….”

“Pleeeeeeesease?”

The man sighed, “Alright. Ten minutes. That’s it, then you have to sleep or else your mother will cut me into tiny piece to feed to the dragon in the basement.”

“That’s not a dragon, Daddy, it’s a furnace.” Darcy reminded and Loki wondered what a furnace was.

“When did you figure that out?”

“Darius said I had to go down there and look at it or else he was going to tell all of my class that I still have stuffed animals in my bed.” Darcy explained. “And I learned that there’s only the furnace and no dragon.”

The man laughed, “Your brother is a stinker. Sleep tight, Angel. I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Loki watched as a set of heavy boots clomped across Darcy’s purple floor. He waited till the door was closed to slip out from under her bed. “Was that your father?”

Darcy sat up, her long hair damp and she smelled…sweet. Perhaps she had just taken a bath.

“Loki! I knew you would come!”

Jörmungandr slithered onto her hand, his toothless mouth wide open in greeting. “I pinky promised.”

Her smile glowed in the darkened room. “Did you read the book?”

Alight with joy, Loki didn’t hesitate to sit on the edge of her bed and pull out A Wrinkle in Time. “Yes. It was marvelous. I loved it! The writer must have been very smart to have produced such a magical novel.”

“Madeline L’engle.” Darcy said, just as enthused as he was. “What do you mean, ‘magical’?”

With steady hands, Loki pulled out his notes, handing them to Darcy. He explained what he knew about the tesseract in the different realms and how Midgard thought of it.
All the time, Darccy read. He noticed she did not read fast, her eyes drifting across the page slowly. It may have been the only thing Loki saw her do with patience. Her little eyebrows came together. “Loki, what is this word?”

He looked over at his notes. “svartalfheim.”

She nodded and kept reading, her finger trailing under the words as she went. He admired her. According to her, she was only nine. He could not even speak when he was nine. Then again, Darcy would not live to be as old as he would either.

Darcy finally put down the notes, eyes wide. “Wow. You’re really smart. I didn’t understand some of that. The tesseract is a real thing? Or is it a shape? Is the tesseract on Earth? Or is it one of those other places? What’s the tesseract made out of? What is a Yggdrasil?”

Loki considered every question. “Well, that’s what I’ve been researching. According to Asgardian knowledge, the tesseract is real and a very powerful…uh…thing. I don’t know exactly what it is, only that it is powerful and not much is known about it. I don’t know where it is, either. Yggdrasil is the Nine Realms. Sort of a tree that encompasses them.”

Darcy stared at him blankly for a moment. “Can you draw a picture of it?”

Loki’s mind sparked. “Of course. Do you have a pen?”

Hastily, she stood, running to a white desk in the corner of her room and opening a drawer. “I have crayons.”

“Can I write with them?” he asked curiously, unsure of what crayons were.

She nodded earnestly, handing him a long cylindrical piece of colored wax. He figured it would work well. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She replied, throwing herself back on the bed, scrambling to sit close up next to him. “Go ahead.”

Smiling at her eagerness, Loki pulled out his journal, opening it to a blank page. He drew out lines like his father had many years ago when explaining Yggdrasil to he and Thor when they sat on his lap in the throne room. “This is Asgard, Midgard, Vanahiem, Alfheim, Svartalfheim, Jotunheim, Nilfheim, Muspelheim, and Helheim.” He explained. “Midgard is Earth.”

Darcy traced her finger over the circle that represented Jotunheim. “So, this is space?”

Loki nodded, “Most of what is known.”

She traced through Nilfheim and Muspelheim. “Is the tesseract on one of these places?”

“Probably. According to Asgardian books, the tesseract was lost a very long time ago and was passed around under-hand for a long time. We don’t know.” He concluded, running his hand over his journal.

“Well,” Darcy sighed standing up, “I guess we’ll just have to find it.”

“What?”

“We have to find the tesseract.” Darcy repeated, going over to her bookshelf and studying the books. “I’m going to need to finish the series of a Wrinkle in Time. After that, I’ll go to the library.
and see what they have there. You can do research on Asgard. We can even get maps and stuff! It’ll be great.” She whispered, flying around her room and picking up writing utensils and paper.

She sat at her desk, Jörmungandr slithering onto the end of her pencil and biting the pink tip. “Darcy, the tesseract has been lost for a really long time. We cannot find it.”

She turned to look at him, blowing a lock of brown hair out of her face. “My Dad says you can do anything you want if you work really hard. It’s out there somewhere, Loki. Please?”

He looked back and forth from her pleading expression and how her bottom lip pouted a little to Jörmungandr’s gaping mouth as he slipped to sit on top of Darcy’s head. Really, the idea seemed fun. Think of how impressed all of Thor’s friends would be if he found the tesseract. And it would make Darcy happy. “Okay… I suppose we can. But we must be careful. My Father says the different realms can be dangerous.”

Darcy tapped her chin with one hand and reached up to take Jörmungandr with the other. “Hm, well, I took a Karate class last year. But the instructor told me I wasn’t calm enough to take karate. She said I was hyper. I told her that her class was boring and we didn’t kick stuff enough.”

“What did she say?”

Darcy shrugged sitting down on her bed and clutching a worn looking stuffed horse. “Well, she didn’t say anything else. But my mom said I should try something other than karate.”

“What is Karate?” Loki asked interested.

Darcy stood on her bed, flattening out her hands and slicing the air with them. “It’s this awesome fighting thing! You break boards with your hands and stuff. Well, that’s what it’s supposed to be. But my instructor didn’t know anything about karate. She said I had to learn to be calm to break boards.”

Loki cocked his head curiously, “Why would you wish to break boards? Is it a custom on Midgard?”

“No. I just think it would be cool.” She sighed, moving around several of the fluffy pillows on her bed. “I could be like The Karate Kid. Or something. My mom let me and Darius stay up late and watch it a little while ago. That’s why I wanted to learn karate.”

He was confused by this. “What did you watch? A kid? Why?”

She giggled, stacking the pillows until they were sitting in a small barricade of bedding and animals. “No, the movie. Have you seen it? Do they have movies on Asgard?”

“What are movies?” Loki asked abashedly. Would she think less of him since he knew very little about her society? Jörmungandr didn’t seem to care about movies or what they were. He was too busy staring skeptically at one of Darcy’s fake, plush snakes.

Darcy jumped up on her bed, causing the barricade to break. “Movies are awesome! Hold on, I have a movie player in my room. We can watch Mulan! Or do you want to watch the Karate Kid?”

Loki was warmed by her excitement. Of course Darcy would not judge him for his ignorance. “Whichever you prefer.”

She stacked the pillows again before kicking them off her bed. “I don’t know. Mulan is my favorite but…okay, how about we watch Mulan and then after we can watch The Karate Kid?”
“Whatever you like.” Loki replied, unsure.

She bounded up, excitedly flying to the door where she stopped. Jörmungandr curled up on Loki’s knee, staring at Darcy as she pressed her ear to the door and peered through the crack between it and the floor. After what looked like much heavy contemplation, she carefully turned the knob, the door pulling open with ease. She smiled at the dark hallway. She waved her hand for Loki to follow her. “I have to check to see if my parents are still up. Usually when my dad is home, him and my mom go to bed early. They usually lock their door too. Darius says it’s because they’re vampires, but I think my mom just doesn’t want me to wake them up in the morning. I always wake up early.”

Loki nodded at her whispers, carefully treading in Darcy’s footsteps as they padded across strange carpeted floors. Midgard was so different the Asgard, but he liked it. The walls were not stone or wood or metal, rather something else. And it was not quite as regal. Everything was open and painted different colors. The room they were in now was painted a warm yellow hue he suspected would look nice in the sun.

Darcy took his hand as they reached a set of stairs, “Follow my footsteps. These stairs squeak. Sometimes when Darius and me get up to find our presents on Christmas morning, he accidently steps on the stairs that squeak and my parents wake up.” She explained, pressing her small feet in different places on the stairs.

“Okay. Darcy, why are we sneaking?” he asked, “Are you not supposed to leave your room?”

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Darcy tapped her chin, “Well, I’m not not supposed to leave my room. I’m supposed to be asleep, but I’m not tired. And you’re here!” she ended loudly, quickly covering her mouth with her hands. “Oops.”

They laughed silently for a second, looking up the stairs to see if anyone was coming. Sure that they would not be caught, Darcy ran through the open house, into an area with sofas, plush leather chairs and a large flat black object of sorts. He watched was Darcy bent down in front of a cupboard and extracted two plastic cases.

She walked back to him, creeping on her toes, avoiding certain spots on the floor. Darcy must sneak around her house often, perhaps as often as he snuck around the guards when exploring places he shouldn’t. Like the prisons, or around the city. He felt again a bond with Darcy he identified as friendship. He smiled to himself, feeling warm inside. Or perhaps that was his hunger. He had not eaten for quite some time now.

“Alright, now…” she trailed off as his stomach made an offensive noise. “Are you hungry?”

Loki, stuck between his need for food and polite mannerisms. “I am, but I shall be fine until I return to Asgard.”

She handed him the plastic cases, “Are you sure? Because my mom got more ice cream. It’s blue-moon.”

“Ice cream?”

Her eyebrows disappeared behind her hair, “You’ve…!?” she began, but Loki quickly clamped his hand over her mouth. Her face relaxed some as he pulled away. She continued in a whisper, “You’ve never had ice cream?”

“No, I do not think we have it on Asgard. What is it?”
In no time at all, he and Darcy were back in her room, a small screened device she called a ‘movie player’ between them. They shared a glass bowl full of the most delicious confection he ever had in his life. It was cold and creamy and sweet and Loki decided that he would ask the cooks on Asgard if they could recreate such a thing. Jörmungandr sat happily on the edge of the bowl, occasionally dipping his head into the melted bit of cream at the bottom of the bowl.

Darcy was preoccupied, setting up her furniture in different ways to hang her blankets on them. “Are we going to watch the movie yet Darcy?” Loki asked, setting his spoon down to save her some of their treat.

She huffed as a purple blanket fell from her lamp. “I’m trying to build a blanket fort. Darius used to make them in the living room. But he stopped when he got his PSP.”

“Why would we fortify ourselves with pillows and blankets? Who is attacking?” Loki asked, only partly joking.

She grumbled angrily as her pillows toppled over. “It’s just for fun. You just sit under all the blankets and feel cozy and stuff.” She explained, standing on her toes to reach the lamp again.

Loki stood as well, helping her. “Perhaps if we try it this way…. ” He suggested, moving the blankets and pillows so they stacked against her bed and the covers stretched out over their sitting space, creating a canopy for them to sit under. He tucked the end of the blanket into a drawer on her dresser so it stayed hanging. “Hey, I never thought to do it that way! Thanks Loki!”

He smiled openly at the praise, helping her move the obscene amount of animals into their fort along with a few pillows for them to lie on. Darcy snuggled up in them, her purple night-clothes obscured by a number of stuffed horses. She took a bite of blue ice cream, grinning in satisfaction. “Mmm, I love ice cream. Blue-moon is my favorite. But I like mint chocolate-chip too.”

“On Asgard, we have cake for deserts, flavored with fruits and honey.” He commented, taking a bite himself. Jörmungandr, now completely covered in ice cream opened his mouth in absolute glee, tongue flicking around. Darcy giggled at him, turning on the little movie player, and putting the ‘DVD’ mulan inside. She pressed a button and the flat screen began to play images and music.

He watched in fascination. “What is this?”

“A movie.” Darcy explained through a mouthful of melting blue cream.

Loki’s eyes were glued to the screen. He found himself caught up in both the story of the girl Mulan and how she had to stand up for her father by taking his place in battle, and how a small screen could do such magic. On Asgard they had scrying glass and spells that could make images appear in thin air, but this…

This was so different.

Perhaps it was the disc that cast the spell? A two-part system?

His absorption with the story won over his curiosity of the device at most points. The little dragon, Mushu, and his schemes to become powerful made him laugh. Darcy hid her face at all the embarrassing moments and sang along quietly with all the songs. Overall, Loki very much liked Mulan. He first thought he might compare her to Sif, but then thought again, Sif did not want to be a warrior to save anyone. She only wanted to prove herself and would never dress up as a man to do so.

He watched the movie till the end, irritated with General Shang. Mulan had been a valiant warrior,
had she not? And yet he cast her out because she was a woman. Even at the end when he came to his senses and went to Mulan for forgiveness, Loki still thought that he should do more than return her helmet. Though, Mulan’s grandmother’s input did make him laugh. “Darcy, why doesn’t Mulan tell him no? Why doesn’t she stay with the Emperor? She could be a very powerful woman and prove herself further? Or is it that she does not wish to prove herself anymore?”

Darcy did not reply and he looked down at the small Midgardian girl to find her curled up into his side, her hand clutching a stuffed yellow fish. Hushing himself, Loki found Jörmungandr, still coated in melted ice cream, happily dozing in the bottom of the ice cream dish.

Silently, he cast a spell to clean his pet and placed the snake in his pocket. He gently moved Darcy off of him, surprised to find her so light. He barely had to use any muscle to lift her into bed. Where all Midgardians this fragile?

Darcy sighed in her sleep as Loki replaced her pillows, blankets and stuffed animals. Loki found her lolling mouth and soft snores rather endearing. He left the bowl on her nightstand and glanced down at the movie player.

Oh, he wanted to see how it worked. Darcy wouldn’t mind, would she? He would only borrow it for a day or two and he wouldn’t break it. He just wanted to see how it worked. Perhaps he should ask.

“Darcy?”

She stayed asleep, her eyes not even fluttering.

“Darcy?” he tried again.

This time she moved a little, her mouth lolling open. “Uuh.”

“May I borrow your movie player?” he asked in a whisper.

“Mmmfbrrgh.” She replied, her face buried in a pillow.

“I promise to return it.” He vowed, picking up the device and shrinking it to fit in his coat. He bent to slide under the bed when a small hand brushed is shoulder.

“Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

“Don’t…don’t forget about the tesseract. We have to find it.” She slurred, hand slinking back under her pillow.

“We will Darcy. Even if we must travel to Jotunnheim, we will find the tesseract.” He assured in a whisper, gently patting her shoulder.

“Cool.” she sighed, the exhaled air blowing her messy brown locks over her face.

Jörmungandr stirred, slithering onto Loki’s shoulder as he lay underneath Darcy’s bed, waiting for the passage to open. “Come, Jörmungandr, let us return home. We have much work to do.”

Chapter End Notes
So, I went through and read all of the suggestions people have for cute misadventures of Loki and Darcy and I love them. For this chapter I included some Midgardian food introductory and a pillow fort though I fully intend to make many of the other things happen as well.
The idea of prankster Darcy and Loki makes me feel fuzzy on the inside and it will totally happen. Feel free to keep sending me suggestions because I love to read them and they give me inspiration on what next to write.

Something that needs to be addressed is Hel. I realize that she is not a horse in Norse Mythology, however, she is in this fancition. I've decided Loki will have no affiliation with Sleipnir at all. Just to keep things from getting weird.
That is all! Drop a comment if you want, ask a question, leave a request, shout some gibberish, whatever you like. Or don't if you don't want to.

Also, Unicorn_Lady sent me this gif and I think it needs to be shared. If you thought baby snakes weren't cute, you have officially been proved otherwise.
Frank in a Paint-War

Chapter Summary

Thor gets mad, Loki has a sleepover, Frank gets in a paint war, Darcy's mom goes crazy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next few weeks were the happiest Loki could remember. He and Darcy were a force to be reckoned with. They fell into a certain kind of schedule that suited them both. He would leave after his midday meal to the passage to Midgard, Jörmungandr in tow. He would make it into Darcy’s room around the time she got home from school. For the rest of the evening, he would help her with her school work if she needed it, which most of the time, she didn’t. Darcy was very smart, the only problem was, she couldn’t sit still long enough to look at the problems in front of her.

She was always moving.

Darcy moved when she was working on math, or when they watched movies, and even when she was listening to him speak. He learned quickly that her movement in no way meant she wasn’t paying attention. In fact, she paid better attention when she did move. So, he thought better not to bring it up.

When he returned her movie player after disassembling it over and over, even making modifications to improve the quality of the image with magic, she had bounced around excitedly. “It’s in 3-D! Loki you made my movie player 3D!”

He would figure out what that meant later.

Their search for the tesseract was relentless. Darcy gave him new books every day. Some of them had very little to do with the tesseract and others so very much. He was even able to take a few tomes from Asgard and lend them to her. They spent a good deal of time reading together, writing notes on their new discoveries, and enjoying snacks that Darcy’s mother made. Darcy liked carrots and a delectable sauce called ‘ranch dressing’. It could be eaten with anything, according to Darcy, along with a tomato-type pottage called ‘ketchup’.

Loki preferred treats called ‘pizza rolls’. They were the essence of deliciousness. He often dipped them in ranch dressing. Even Jörmungandr had become infatuated with ‘hot dogs’. Darcy did not think much of them, but the small snake would refrain from eating other things if it meant he would get one of those long meat rolls later. Loki did not think they were very good, but Jörmungandr could eat ten in a minute. Darcy had counted.

Recently, they had been planning an expedition.

It had been Darcy’s idea that they go explore Midgard together, but they were constantly running into issues.

First, Darcy’s parents and brother were always downstairs when it was daylight, and they both
agreed it was essential that her family stay ignorant of his presence.

Second, his attire was not Midgardian and Darcy told him that people would get suspicious if they walked around with him dressed so strangely.

Third, Darcy claimed it was not safe for children to walk around outside at night. That meant they would have to go on the last two days of a Midgardian week called a ‘weekend’. And they would have to ride bikes or walk or take the bus.

They were able to remedy parts of the situation.

Darcy told him that sometimes, Darius went over to his friend Jake’s house after school to spend the night. That meant Saturday morning, they were free to go outside for the day while Darius played at his friend’s house. Darcy also guaranteed that Darius was bigger than Loki, but Loki was taller. So, the clothes might be able to fit. It was a well thought out plan.

Loki woke up on the Midgardian ‘Friday’, thoroughly excited for his outing with Darcy the next day. He intended to stay the night at her house so there would be no time wasted that morning. Darcy claimed that it was common for friends to sleep at each other’s houses on occasion.

Jörmungandr slithered off of Loki’s pillow. He had grown and was now stretched the length from Loki’s wrist to the tip of his middle finger. Loki yawned, letting his friend slip onto his knee lazily.

“What shall we do today, Jörmungandr?”

The snake responded by putting his mouth over Loki’s thumb affectionately.

He sighed, falling back onto his pillows, “We should practice magic. Freshen up on spells that could help while we’re at the Midgardian Library.”

The snake coiled his body around Loki’s finger, tongue flicking over his palm. “I am convinced you only stay with me because of the food.” He giggled as the small animal slithered up his arm to rest in his hair.

Once he was dressed for the day, Loki rushed off to the hall to dine. Thor was sitting at one end of the table by Sif and Hogun, Mjolnir on the floor beside him. Loki had chanced sparing with Thor and his new weapon and he dared to say that it was as terrifying as facing a bilgesnipe. It was truly a weapon worthy of a king.

Thor, however, did not look like he wielded the weapon of a king. His face was set in a full pout while he viciously shoved bits of bread, fruit, and roast pheasant into his mouth. Loki, unthinking, sat next to his brother and began to eat his breakfast, a glow of excitement radiating from his skin. Mother had given him permission to be gone for an entire night due to his nearing on adolescence.

“What are you so happy about?” Sif sneered, a piece of oiled bread in her hand.

Loki shrugged, not sure if he should mention that he had been granted permission to do something that Thor would never be able to do. It seemed rude to brag. “It is a fine day, is it not?”

Thor slammed down his goblet at this, “Of course! It’s always a fine day for Loki! When were you going to tell me that father gave you permission to adventure!? Did you not think me worthy? Or were you too caught up in your books?”

“Thor, I meant no offense…”

“Oh, didn’t you?” his blonde brow coming together in anger, “Is that where you’ve been lately?”
Loki held up his hands, Jörmungandr lifting his sleek head from Loki’s eggs to watch. “Thor, listen. I only go to study. Really, I’m not doing anything you would be interested in. I only got permission so I could advance my research.”

Sif scoffed, Hogun seemed entirely unattached, Thor was bitterly angry. “Oh yes! Loki the studious! Always looking to answer the questions of Yggdrasil! Allowed to leave for the entire day and abandon his training for womanly practices!”

Loki tried not to be hurt. Thor was just angry. He would stop when he calmed down. In the meantime, Loki thought it better to leave. He would not be the rut of Thor’s distress. Standing, he picked up Jörmungandr and turned to his brother, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Your chance will come in time, Thor. Do not be discouraged.”

Thor batted his hand away, shoving off his younger brother. “Go back to your magic Loki. No matter how much time you spend studying, you will never be a true warrior. They’re just tricks and cannot impress anyone. You cannot be king!”

Loki swallowed dryly, lips pursed. It was not princely to leave conversation without excusing yourself or using some farewell remark, but he made an exception in this case, walking slowly to the library without so much as a backwards glance at his brother. He did not need Thor’s approval of his studies. He did not need Asgard to be impressed with him. It did not matter that he was not a warrior or that he couldn’t be king.

He had Darcy. A friend. If even for a short while, they could find the tesseract and explore and discover new things. Squaring his shoulders, Loki strode into the library, nodding to Lady Asta on his way to his usual table.

Taking out his book of notes, Loki fell into tranquility. It wasn’t that he intended to be king, grant it he wished sometimes that he could be. But Thor was the firstborn, and hence, the crowned prince. Loki was only second in line. The more he learned about the duties of being king, the more Loki’s opinions of it contrasted. It was a responsibility that involved leaving his books and magical studies for ruling.

Yet, it ushered in the opportunity to change Asgard, to use what he learned to improve its functions. The potential influence of his studies on Asgard could be quite beneficial. But Thor was right in one regard; he was not a warrior. Asgardians, when looking for security in their kings, took it from the strength of their leaders in battle. Loki was capable in a fight, but relied too heavily on magic and mischief. Thor, on the other hand, was the epitome of what Asgard looked for in a king. Tall, strong, golden….

Loki sighed, shaking his head. He should focus on his studies. If it was the good of Asgard he cared about, it would suit him to know as much as possible to help guide Thor when he became king.

He focused on becoming absorbed in the list of spells he would master and use for tomorrow.

1. Invisibility spell – useful for making one’s self and other’s invisible to the senses of those around them. (Possible extension to Heimdall, not enough research)
2. Simple Conjuring Spells – conjure small things from the imagination, requires little magic if you have an idea to base it off of. (use entails a great deal of prior magical knowledge; no living things can be conjured)
3. ‘Teleport Spell’: Not quite mastered. Moves person(s) through space in almost no time, uses more magic the further individual(s) travel.
4. Fireball Spell: An offensive spell; dangerous. Mother says only use it in an emergency.
Requires immense focus.

5. Healing Spell: Fixes minor injuries, not recommended for large casualties.

Satisfied, Loki planned to practice his transporting spell. It would be quite useful once he accomplished moving more than four bookshelves away without completely exerting himself. The spell was made for sorcerers who had passed their adolescence and developed their full magical capacity. He was still in his youth and was itching for more potential.

Sighing, he practiced sending Jörmungandr in different directions, sometimes with his eyes shut, sometimes picturing where he wanted his friend to be, then bringing him back. The amount of magic needed for Jörmungandr was less because of his smallness. Eventually, Loki began to move himself around, making personal notes on what he could do to improve his actions.

It had been a few hours when his mother strolled from behind a shelf just in time to see the second prince appear from some unknown destination in front of his notes to write. “Loki.”

He peered over his shoulder, a light grin meeting his lips. “Hello Mother.”

She came up behind him, stroking a lock of hair behind his ear. “How are you today?”

“Very well. I have almost captured the essence of what this spell needs to work.” He explained softly, scrawling across the page.

Frigga smiled tenderly. “It seems that you have done so most conventionally. Loki, would you mind taking a rest from your studies? I wish to discuss something with you.”

“Of course, Mother.” He said, letting Jörmungandr slither onto his hand and stowing his notes in his pocket. They wandered through the library and into the main halls, Jörmungandr flicking his tongue over Loki’s earlobe. “What is it you wish to discuss?”

The Queen’s smile faltered a bit. “There are a couple things. First, I would like to speak of your brother.”

“Yes?”

“What do you think would help him?” Frigga inquired. “Loki, you must understand some things. You are quite perceptive, of everyone but yourself. He has been quite temperamental as of late.”

Loki nodded, crossing his arms behind his back as they walked. “Well, I think that Thor is bitter because I have more freedoms than him because I am younger.”

“Very true.” Frigga agreed, her blonde eyebrows coming together, “He is angry at you.”

He exhaled deeply, “I know. I do not know how to soothe his nerves.”

“Loki,” his mother began, a hand under her chin, “you are very important to your brother. It is not good for him to be resentful of you. How must you fix this?”

His mouth set, “I do not know. Perhaps his anger will recede.”

Frigga shook her head, “No, Loki. I will not have a rift between the two of you. Your transferring to adolescence is coming up soon and you will find that you may begin being irritable with him as well. It would be easier to mend your relationship now.” She took in his blank stare. “Consider this a matter of spells Loki. What is the goal of a perfect spell?”
He hummed in thought. “Optimum strength possible with little energy exerted.”

“And what does that necessitate?”

The answer hit Loki, as Darcy so charmingly put it, like ‘a sack of bricks’. “Balance.” He said.

“Exactly.” Frigga said, taking her son’s hand as they stared out onto the bright Asgardian afternoon. “So often people believe that all there is to a King is how he fights. But Loki they are wrong. You must find a balance with Thor, Loki. Brothers should not fight. Nor should one let the other blame him for the other’s problems. Show him that where he has strength, you have intelligence. Both are needed from Asgard’s princes.”

Loki nodded in understanding. “I will attempt to reason with him the next time we meet.”

His mother gave him a knowing look. “Thank you, my son.”

He nodded, “What was the other matter you wish to discuss?”

Her smile broadened a bit, “As you may be aware, in the next few days, we will host the ceremony of your adolescence.”

Excitement stirred inside his gut. “I am aware.”

“No doubt you have read about it before, but I must warn you before hand of the effect it will have on you.” Frigga cautioned. “Because you practice magic, you will occasionally gain massive inflation of magical energy. It will be difficult manage at times. You must be prepared for these.”

Loki had read about the adolescent magical tendencies. They varied based on the magical capacity and race of the sorcerer. Some only struggle with anxious eating habits or scorching desires to conjure toads. Others are less fortunate and become emotionally imbalanced, craving power or dominance. From what he read, these cases are rare and can be treated with ‘a powerful emotional link’. “I have studied the matter.”

Frigga chuckled, “Indeed. However, I want you to start finding something that will calm you down better than anything else. When these influxes of power occur, revisit this practice.”

“Yes Mother.” He promised, thoughts immediately going to Darcy.

***

Loki patted Hel on her bony shoulder. “Good girl.”

She neighed happily, letting Loki remove his satchel from her side. With him, he had brought his sleep clothes, his hair comb, and a desert he had picked up from the kitchens. Darcy was always sharing Midgardian food with him, it only seemed right that he bring her his favorite treat from Asgard.

Biding Hel goodbye, he and Jörmungandr ran to the cave opening, slipping inside and teleopting to Midgard. Darcy’s voice was audible from under the bed.

“Oh yeah! Darius, isn’t home! It’s my birthday, woohoo, woohoo, woohoo!” she sang, her small socked feet dancing around her purple room.

He slipped from under her bed, a smile on his face. “Hello Darcy.”

“Loki!” she exclaimed, falling to her knees beside the bed, “You wouldn’t believe it! Darius isn’t
going to be here until Saturday afternoon! I’ve got some of his clothes that he doesn’t wear that much so my mom won’t know. And I’ve got maps!”

She hurried to her bookshelf, pulling out a tall book labeled *Land Mammals*. From inside the cover, she removed a shiny piece of folded paper. “I found this in the coffee shop my mom goes to. It was sitting on a table of cards and stuff. So, I hid it in my book.”

Loki straightened his armor, sitting on her bed and pulling his bag up with him. “You hid it in a book? Clever.”

“I know! Here, look at it. I think we have to walk into the city. It shouldn’t be far.” Darcy said, handing him the map. “Are you sure you can’t ride a bike?”

He unfolded the sticky piece of paper, examining the unfamiliar navigation systems. “Ah, no, I think not. I have only seen a bicycle in that children’s book on your shelf. What do these markings mean?” he asked, pointing to a pale hatched line that swerved across the paper.

Darcy sat next to him, a lock of her hair brushing over his shoulder, “Those are train tracks.”

“What are trains?” Loki asked. He assumed it was a form of transportation, like cars or airplanes.

“Trains? They’re like big cars but with one engine in the front and they run on train tracks. The car at the end is called a caboose.” She tapped her chin, falling back on her stuffed animals, “Well, my dad says that people used to use trains to travel around a lot. But not anymore. Now they’re mostly used to carry around stuff. Like rocks.”

“Perhaps tomorrow we can see a train.” Loki suggested, opening his bag. “And I brought you something.”

Darcy’s wide blue eyes widened in delightful surprise. On her face was the sincere happiness and excitement he looked forwards to. Jörmungandr slithered onto her head, his tail slinking down over her eyebrows. “Really? Is it a book? Is it a flower? What—“

“Hold on a second!” Loki warned, reaching into his bag and closing his hand over the pastry. It was wrapped up in a draw-string bag adventurers used when they went out. It could keep food warm for long lengths of time. He smiled at his friend. “Close your eyes.”

Obediently, Darcy’s eyes snapped shut and her small lips pressed together in excitement. “Are you going to tell me yet?”

“Darcy, why would I tell you to close your eyes if I was going to tell you?” he teased openly and she giggled.

“I don’t know, hurry up!”

Without hesitation, he placed the bag in her hands and she felt it curiously, opening her eyes. Carefully, she pulled open the strings and removed the treat. It was shaped like an Asgardian rose, the crust flaked into the many petals, the center was a rosy pink, giving an implication to the warm strawberry center.

“Wow, it’s pretty.” Darcy said, cupping it in her hands. “Thank you, Loki!”

He grinned, pleased that she enjoyed his gift as he has enjoyed hers. “You’re welcome. It tastes better than it looks.”
She laughed and took a bite, those big blue eyes taking up half her face as she chewed. She swallowed before speaking. “That’s amazing.”

She took another bite, falling back on her pillows and kicking her legs a bit. “Mmm mmm mmm. How do they make this? Are these strawberries? And cream? Here…” she tore the flower in two and handed Loki half of it.

He held up a hand, “No, I couldn’t. Darcy it is yours.”

She pouted, “I’m sharing. Sharing is caring, Loki.”

He hesitated.

Darcy nudged him, “Come on, you know you want it.”

“If you insist.” He relented, taking his half of the pastry and biting into it. Flavor consumed his mouth as he searched for words to properly describe the taste on his tongue. It was almost as good as Midgardian pizza rolls.

Darcy sucked on her fingers once her half of the pastry was finished. “That was great. Do you eat those a lot?”

“When the kitchens make them. Sometimes I request them, but mother says I should not eat too many.” He sighed, standing up and walking around Darcy’s room. He was admittedly entertained by her small toys. They were fascinating. Whether it be the materials or their functions.

He picked up something squishy and purple from her desk, holding it up. It seemed to be a small flat hand with a long stretchy rope attached to it. He gave it a casual flick to the side and the hand stuck itself to the wall. “Darcy? What is this?”

She glanced up from the map, walking over to him. “Oh, that’s my Whacky-Whack.”

“Your what?”

“My Whacky-Whack.” She clarified, peeling the hand from the wall.

“A Whacky-Whack?”

“Yep.”

“And what is its purpose?” he inquired holding up the rubbery toy.

Darcy sighed, taking it from his hand and slung it about wildly till the tiny hand hit his face. “That. That is what it does.”

Loki skeptically picked the toy from his face. “Interesting. Isn’t there something better that could be done with these?”

“I don’t know. Maybe….”

And that is how Loki learned about finger painting. Darcy explained to him that it was usually done with actual fingers, but they could try it with the Whacky-Whacks (she had five). At first, it was quite fun. They dipped the bits of stretchy material into paints and hit papers with it, making little handprints. Then Darcy’s hit Loki in the face, leaving a large blue glob of paint across his cheek.
That\ resulted in a ‘paint-war’, as Darcy so elegantly put it.

“CHARGE!” Darcy screamed, her hair matted with green and red paint, her cheekbones marked with bright blue stripes. In her hands were two Whacky-Whacks, dripping with paint.

Loki was not in any better state, his armor coated in a thick layer of blue, yellow, and purple. “I wouldn’t, Darcy!” he called, swinging around his own Whacky-Whacks, backing up as she advanced. She truly had poor fighting tactics. “I am a prince and am trained as such!”

One of the hands hit him in the chest and he responded by adding more red paint to her neck and face. Darcy, who was unable to land any more blows with her Whacky-Whacks, jumped on him, throwing all her weight onto his chest. It was the shock that threw him to the ground and kept him there as Darcy smeared the remainder of her blue paint on his face.

Jörmungandr even joined in, rolling in the yellow paint and spinning over the floor and Darcy’s toes.

Giggling, he turned them over so she was on her back. He did so playfully as not to hurt Darcy. He learned a while ago that Midgardians were not as strong as Asgardians. He picked up the green paint and was about to wipe it over her face when the bedroom doorknob began to turn. “Darcy, what are you doing in there?”

Immediately, Loki remembered his spells, turning himself invisible and moving to a far corner of the room. Darcy’s mom entered and for the first time, Loki had a good look of her. She wasn’t very tall, but she had brown hair like Darcy and large pretty brown eyes that were now filled with horror. “Darcy Lewis! Your room!”

Loki glanced around shamefully. They had truly made a mess. The walls, the ceiling, the floor, Darcy’s possessions were all covered in Whacky-Whack hand prints and splatters of paint. Darcy looked around frantically, a hand coming in contact with her forehead, successfully coating her face with green-blue paint. “Woah. That’s a lot of paint.”

“DARCY!”

“Wait! Mom, I’m sorry! I just forgot about…stuff. I can clean it up!” Darcy protested as her mother’s horror quickly morphed into anger.

“Oh no, you’re going to take a shower while I try to deal with all this!” she sighed, “You’re hair needs attention anyways.”

Darcy’s hands flew to her hair, thick and tangled with paint. “No. Mom. Please, I’ll do anything. I’ll clean it up.”

Darcy’s mother shook her head in exasperation. “Not another word. I’m going to get the carpet cleaner while you get into the shower.”

She left the room after glaring sternly at her daughter. Immediately after she left, Darcy ran up to her door and closed it. “Loki! Help! She’s angry and she wants to do my hair! I won’t have any hair left because she’ll rip it out!”

Loki turned himself visible, racking his mind for the right words to a spell. “I think I can clean it up. Hold on.”

She waited anxiously by the door as Loki raised his hand, casting the spell with some effort. In a bright green flash, the room, Jörmungandr and Loki were clear of all paint. He felt the small snake
curl on the toe of his boot. Everything was spotless and back to its original color without so much as a stain. Well, all except Darcy. She was still covered.

“You did it!” Darcy explained, pumping her drying fist in the air.

The doorknob jiggled and Loki turned himself invisible again as Darcy’s mother reentered tugging a strange large plastic device. Her mouth gaped. “Darcy…what…where…?”

Darcy triumphantly put her hands on her hips. “I told you I could clean it up! Taa daa! I guess you won’t have to tear out all my hair now! I won’t even have to shower!”

“No…Darcy…the mess…How…?”

“I used my shirt!” Darcy lied excitedly, “So, you can go now. You’re not going to rip out my hair, are you?”

Darcy’s Mother leaned against the door in disbelief. “I’m going crazy.”

“Go drink some coffee. Daddy says he goes crazy without coffee.” Darcy smiled, blue paint covering one tooth.

“Just…just shower Darcy.”

“Shoot.”

About an hour later, Darcy was clean, dressed in her pajamas and sitting in front of Loki as he brushed out her hair. He’d been doing it a lot lately since Darcy hated even looking at a brush and she didn’t like her mother to do it. Surprisingly, he liked it. The only terrible part was that Darcy didn’t hold still and it made getting some knots especially difficult.

That night, Darcy’s mom bought a food called pizza which was like a pizza roll, but better. Darcy brought him up two slices from the kitchen and he ate them while they watched a film called Shrek in their blanket fort. Loki snuck to the bathroom to change into his sleepwear and relieve himself. He was intrigued by the different appliances.

He jumped a little at the loud noise the ‘potty’ made when flushed.

Perhaps Asgard was better in that respect.

He and Darcy fell asleep with Jörmungandr still watching the movie.

***

“Loki, wake up! Come on, my mom went out to go get milk. She said I could go outside whenever as long as back home by lunchtime!”

Loki yawned, stretching smiling at the blanket of the blanket fort over his head. “What time is it?”

“Seven o’ three. Come on! Get up! My mom can’t see that you’re here!” Darcy exclaimed, bouncing up and down, already dressed in pants made of a material called ‘denim’ and a purple sweater. “Come on!”

Jörmungandr lifted his head lazily from his place on Loki’s pillow. They never woke up this early. “In a moment.”

“Loki, get up. Come on, you’re being like my mom. It’s a Saturday and you’re wasting it with
sleeping! You can do that on a school day.” Darcy encouraged, shaking his shoulder.

Giving in, Loki crawled out from his sleeping space, Jörmungandr lolling on his shoulder. Darcy led him downstairs where they ate ‘cereal’ which was no more than sugar and milk. Though, in truth, ‘Fruit-Loops’ were quite wonderful.

Darcy put their dishes in the sink, rushing him back upstairs hand handing him a stack of Darius’ clothes. He dressed in them, deciding that whoever wore them had the most unfortunate taste in style. The shirt was yellow with a flimsy collar, the jeans were too light of blue and they didn’t come far enough down on his legs so the white socks were visible.

“Your brother dresses horribly.” Loki remarked, observing himself in the mirror, attempting to comb his hair back with Darcy’s brush.

Darcy sighed. “I know. I keep telling him ‘purpler’, but then he kicks me out of his room.”

Loki set down the brush, satisfied with his hair while his friend bounded around the room collecting a pack full of things she thought they would need on the way to the library. This included: a map, a rope, a portable light, a toothbrush, three snack bars, some leftover pizza, *A Wrinkle in Time*, three crayons, and five pencils.

“Alright! We’re ready!” Darcy said, fitting the pack on her back, holding out her hand for Jörmungandr to slither on. “Wait, I have to go potty. You can go wait downstairs if you want. I’ll be super fast!”

With that she was off and Loki made his way down the stairs to Darcy’s living room where he sat upright on the sofa. On the table in front of him were different looking books. They were not thin enough to be pamphlets, nor were they thick enough to be books. He picked one up, feeling the silky pages filled with pictures of pretty people, some scantily clad, some in such intimate positions he feared this bit of colorful reading may not be meant for his eyes.

Then he came across a picture of a man in what Loki assumed was formal Midgardian attire. The caption for the picture read, *Three Piece Pinstriped Suit; Black.*

Loki remembered his conjuring spell. Surely the apparel the man in the picture wore was more suitable than his current clothes. Confidently, he cast the spell, pleased at how well the *Three Piece Pinstriped Suit* fit him. He was unsure of the strange knot around his neck, referencing the bizarre book for its name.

His ‘tie’, as it was called, he turned green to add color.

Darcy appeared in the room, eyes widening. “Woaaah, where did you get that?”

Loki felt is face get warm, “Magic. Is it alright?”

Darcy pursed her lips, walking in a tight circle around his body. “Well… I guess it’ll work.”

He smiled, detecting the tease in her voice. “Are we ready then?”

“Yep. Unless you have to go pee.” Darcy said, “Did you go yet?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”
“Darcy—"

“I’m just sayin’—“

“Darcy, the tesseract.”

She snapped her fingers, “Right! Let’s go team!” She yelled, pointing straight ahead towards the front door, Jörmungandr hanging off her knuckle, his tongue lolling out most determinedly.

Chapter End Notes

I am so terribly sorry this took so long. Apparently, I’m an unfortunately busy person with a life besides fanfiction. *sigh*

On the bright side, this is really cool! All you guys are amazing with your kudos and comments and stuff! I love that you all like my fic and I’m having a fantabulous time!

I would like to point out Kid Loki in a three piece suit this chapter and shamefully admit that; yes, sometimes I drool over pictures of Tom Hiddleston in a three piece suit, and yes, I thought it would be super cute to put kid Loki in a suit. I’m sorry, it just had to happen.

oops! Did I drop that there?

Per usual, I'm open to suggestions and will take them into account. Usually, always, most times, I will put forth everyone’s ideas if I can fit it in with my scanty plot. Comment if you like, an if you don't like, don't.

Thanks all so much!

Q
Frank Makes a Friend

Chapter Summary

Frank makes a friend, Frigga is boss, Loki hates trains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The Queen demands your presence, Prince Thor.” A messenger said having entered Thor’s room.

Thor was practicing with Mjolnir, testing the weight in his hands and attempting to optimize its strength. “In a while.”

“She insists.” The messenger said again.

Bitterly, Thor stopped swinging Mjolnir. “Fine! What is it that she requires of me?”

The messenger smiled coyly for a moment before being washed in gold light, emerging as the tall, blonde form of his mother. “Is that anyway to address your people, Thor?”

The boy cursed himself internally. How could he not have known? If his mother was upset with him before, she would be seething now. “I’m sorry, Mother.”

She raised her light brow, entering his room and seating herself on a red upholstered chair. “Oh? Thor, perhaps it is not me you need to apologize to.”

He set down Mjolnir, taking a seat across from his mother. “Who else then?”

Her gaze pierced him like bright icy daggers straight through his heart. “I think you know whom.”

Of course, Mother would be upset with him for battering his brother. “Loki? Mother, I have done nothing.”

“Leave the lying to Loki. He’s better at it. Though, he is not so dull as to lie to his mother.” Frigga said knowingly, sending her eldest son a pointed stare.

Thor uncrossed his arms, letting them hang at his sides. “Mother, I do not understand why you trust Loki to go out by himself and he is not even adolescent. It is not fair.”

“Thor, it is not about fairness.” She chided, taking the blonde boy’s hand. “Think about it like this: what is Loki good at?”

“Reading.” Thor grumbled, “Magic, throwing daggers, being irksome.”

“Do not resent your brother.” She scolded lightly, expression firming before continuing her inquisition. “Now, what are you good at?”

He looked over at Mjolnir. “Fighting.”

A tender smile met Frigga’s lips. “Thor, you are a strong, willful, young man. But you must stop
being so cruel to your brother. You have your strengths in battle and passion for the Asgardian custom. But Loki carries important traits as well. He is studious, knowledgeable, and cares for Asgard the same as you. I need you to fix whatever skirmish you have with him. You need Loki at your side, Thor, whether you want him there or not.”

Angrily, Thor stood. “Why?! So that he can protect me? For what purpose—“

“Because he knows things that you do not.” Frigga said, her words clipped, streaking with disappointment that drew Thor back into his chair in shame. “That doesn’t mean that Loki is any more intelligent than you or that you are any less capable. It means that the two of you must find a balance.” She stood, smoothing her skirt. “You must learn to work with your brother.”

“But Mother, what could I possibly do? Train him in the fields? I am not even allowed outside the gardens!” Thor said.

A small smile lit the Queen’s face as she swept from the room. “No. I don’t think you are. Perhaps you should speak with Loki.”

Thor was confused by his mother’s words. Would Loki explain her riddling speech? “Where is he?”

Frigga’s glance flicked out Thor’s window, lingering on the forest just visible near the midday horizon. “You know, I’m not quite sure. Oh well. Do mend things with your brother; it will make your life exceedingly simpler.”

Now, usually Thor left the mind games to Loki, who could understand them as well as give them. However, he was fairly sure his mother had just given him permission to go look for Loki....outside the palace grounds.

“Yes Mother.”

She turned to leave, a smug smile on her face, when she spoke one last command. “Oh, and Thor, darling? This is something you and Loki must do alone. It is a family matter, is it not?”

Thor gulped in nervous anticipation, as he realized he would not be going with his friends. He would go out and find Loki himself.

“Yes Mother.”

***

“Darcy, I think we are lost.” Loki said, bending over her shoulder to look at the map. She was holding it upside down.

“We are not lost, Loki. I’m just taking a detour.” Darcy reminded him for the fourth time in the past hour.

According to Darcy’s watch, they had been walking for two hours and Loki was convinced that their ‘detour’ through the woods had been a bad idea. She claimed that they could get into town quicker if they went through the woods because Darius told her he did that all the time. Loki suspected her older brother had lied.

Darcy rubbed her forehead, opening her bag and pulling out a snack bar. She undid the wrapper, tossing it back into her pack. Jörmungandr looked at it hopefully, his smallish body trailing over Darcy’s hand. Reluctantly, Darcy fed him half the bar, his small mouth gaping to fit the entire
“Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

“How come Frank can eat so much? I was watching the Discovery Channel, and usually snakes get big bellied when they eat stuff.” She said, examining the small creature’s thin body as he made open mouthed grabs at the remainder of her snack.

Loki let Jörmungandr slither onto his hand, “I don’t know. He is an Asgardian snake. Shall I bring you a book on Asgardian animals?”

She nodded enthusiastically, fishing out leftover pizza and handing Loki a slice. “Yeah! Thanks! Now, I think that Main Street is just up here. If we can get through…”

He could see what she meant. A street lay through the stretch of yellow leaved trees, a few buildings popping up. Perhaps Darcy had not been lost. They surged forwards through the wood, Darcy tripping at least five times, helping herself up before Loki could get to her. Finally, they made it to the street and Darcy glanced around, confused.

“That’s funny.”

Loki looked at her skeptically, “What is funny?”

“Uh,” she glanced at the map, then at the buildings, “I don’t know.”

Frustrated, Loki peered at the map, its lines making little sense. “We are lost.”

“Not exactly….”

“We should ask for directions.”

“No, I know exactly where I’m going. I don’t need to ask for directions, Loki.”

Jörmungandr wrapped around his wrist, mouth covering his thumb. “Darcy…”

She folded the map, stowing it in her back pack. “Alright, so…maybe I don’t know exactly where we are. But I’m sure it’s around here somewhere.”

Loki relented, following her on the ‘sidewalk’, watching cars pass and people talk on their ‘cell phones’. It was different, and despite Darcy’s obvious misguidance, he rather liked the envelopment of Midgardian culture. Perhaps Darcy should like to visit Asgard sometime.

They passed buildings, so very different from those on Asgard. Some made with stones, bricks, and wood. Others seemed to be of metal and glass. People passed by, but it did not seem to be busy.

“New York City has a lot of people.” Darcy told him as they turned down a corner they had passed for the third time now. He did not bother her on it. In fact, he was rather enjoying himself. “But, there aren’t so many people here. She walked down a new path that stretched between two tall buildings, a few waste cans in the passage. “I need to sit down. My feet hurt.”

Loki wondered how her feet could tire, as they had only been walking a few hours. Were Midgardians really so fragile? “Shall we look at the map again?” he asked her, looking skeptically at the ground. It did not look terribly clean. “Would you like me to navigate to the library?”
Darcy crossed her legs, pulling out the map. “Okay. But I was thinking maybe we could just ask my mom to drive us to the library next time. It’s eleven o’seven and my mom said I had to be home at twelve.”

Loki smiled a bit, “And we’re lost?”

She sighed loudly, muttering under her breath.

“Darcy, it is not proper to mumble.” He chided, hoping to get one of her giggling smiles or teasing shoves.

She gave him both, “I said, we’re lost. Where’s Frank?”

Loki checked his wrist where the reptile had been only moments ago. He was not there. “I’m not sure.”

“Frank?” Darcy called, an edge of panic in her voice. “Frank! Come on, I want to go home!”

She walked in tight circles in the alley, blue eyes searching the ground for Jörmungandr. Suddenly, there was a large metallic bang! It came from the large steel bins that smelled of waste.

Darcy approached it without hesitation. “Darcy, wait!” Loki said, coming up behind her, his dagger drawn. He’d made a special pocket for it inside his suit.

“Why?” she asked, standing on her toes and he gripped her shoulder to keep her down. “C’mon Loki, I wanna see—"

There was another sharp noise, followed by several scratching noises. “Darcy, it is dangerous. If you become mortally wounded, I cannot fix you with the limited magic I have now.” He said soothingly, trying to talk her out of it.

Darcy shook her head, “Loki, it’s probably just an animal.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, giving another tug. “A feral animal contaminated with disease. Let’s go home, Jörmungandr is probably on the walk-way.”

Though he gave it his best effort, Darcy still managed to climb up the side of the bin and push open the lid. She gasped loudly, her small mouth forming a perfect ‘O’. Instantly, Loki was at her side, prepared to heal any injury or kill any foul creature.

But Darcy’s shock came, not from fear or pain, but rather sentiment. “Oh no.”

There, at the bottom of this strange metal rubbish bin, was the smallest wolf pup Loki had ever seen. It looked up at them hopelessly, whining in need. It’s blue eyes were wide, clear, and beautiful just like Darcy’s. On top of the pup was a slack jawed Jörmungandr, letting his tongue loll happily.

“Loki, help. Here.” Darcy guided her body up the side of the bin and he was impressed with her climbing abilities. Most small people would not be able to lift themselves so far. “Hold my ankles, I’m going to reach down and get them.”

Quickly, Loki grasped her ankles, fingers covering her white socks as she bent over the bin, and she grunted in discomfort. “Almost there…”

“Darcy, perhaps we should try another way?” he asked, moving a hand to grasp under her shoulder.
“No…wait…I’ve almost got….there!” she grunted, “Hoist me up.”

Swiftly, and with as much gentleness as possibly, Loki pulled Darcy back out of the rubbish, the small animal in her hands. Its fur was matted with dirt and bits of Midgardian trash and its paw was bent at a rather painful looking angle. “Do you think it’s a boy or a girl?” she asked him, her small hands tenderly picking plastic from behind the dog’s ear.

Loki carefully placed his hand on the pup’s head, heart warming when it whined affectionately, nose bumping his hand. “A boy, I think. He is hurt.”

Darcy’s wide eyes looked on the verge of tears as she examined his foot. Something deep inside Loki stirred in seeing Darcy upset. Until this moment, he had never seen Darcy anything other than cheerful. He would admit that seeing Darcy in pain was heartbreaking. He would do anything to bring back her smile.

Also, this wolf pup was undeserving of such pain. “His paw is broken, I…I think I may be able to fix it….” Loki breathed, letting Jörmungandr shift onto his hand from the pup’s back.

As he said this, he was reminded of his accidental wayward spell with Hel. He thought he could heal her too…

Shaking his head, he brushed it off. He had practiced healing so much since then. He was determined never to make that same mistake.

Darcy’s smile was what convinced him. It was big, watery, and encouraging. “Really?”

He nodded once, holding up his hands and focusing very hard on the spell in his mind. Jörmungandr waited by, looking like he wanted to retreat to the top of the pup’s head. Closing his eyes, he focused his energy onto the animal’s paw, casting the spell.

Darcy’s sharp intake of air had him panicked in a second. Had he killed this poor thing as well? Would he also reincarnate as an undead wolf?

“Loki…you did it!” Darcy squealed, giggling as the dog wiggled in her arms to lick her chin and dive at Loki.

Glee rose in his chest as the little creature put its muddy paws on his chest, licking his nose in happiness. “I am glad he’s alright.” Loki sighed in relief, picking the last of the garbage off him.

Jörmungandr quickly moved to slither over the pup’s body, exploring curiously. Darcy set the two down, letting the dog chase its tail where Jörmungandr now sat, their small pink tongues both lolling out. Darcy laughed, “Look, Loki, they’re friends!”

Loki smiled as well, slowly relaxing in Darcy’s presence. “A snake and a wolf…”

“He’s not a wolf, Loki. He’s a husky. It’s a type of Earth-Dog that looks like a wolf.” She explained eyeing the large metal bin. “Why would someone put a poor puppy in a dumpster?”

Loki frowned, hesitantly taking her hand in comfort. “Well, perhaps they did not care.”

He watched as her pouty lips went from anger to determination. “Well, I care. He needs a home Loki. I’m going to take him home.”

Loki, having no objection to her desires, led them all out of the alley and back towards the wood, where they were left to his memory to get back. Unfortunately, the weather took an unexpected
turn as it began to rain. Violent droplets drenched them as they plowed through dense forests filled with trees that had nearly lost their leaves and wet yellowing fields.

Loki considered using magic to get them back to Darcy’s house, but he was so drained from healing their new friend that he did not know how stable his magic would be. As they walked through the rain, Loki fell into a sort of sense of tranquility, his mind wandering to books and Midgardian entertainment literature, and his latest thoughts on where the tesseract might be. Religion seemed popular on Midgard, perhaps it was somewhere religious.

After a few minutes of his musings, Loki realized that Darcy’s constant chatter had ceased and the happy scurry of the dog had gone. Anxiously, Loki whipped around, heart thudding to a halt when he came upon nothing but dry sticks and stones.

He was further perturbed when a shrill scream of his favorite voice called out to him. “LOKI!”

***

Honestly, Darcy didn’t mean to get lost from Loki. They were walking together, and then out of nowhere, she was distracted by a clearing and had gone off to explore, the dog and Jörmungandr following in her wake.

That’s when she noticed the train track.

Hadn’t they just talked about trains yesterday? This would be the perfect opportunity to show Loki what a train was! If she just got closer and found a good place to wait…

Excited, Darcy ran over to the tracks, inspecting their gravelly undertones and metal bars. She had never stood on train tracks before. The Husky puppy was bobbing along beside the track, Jörmungandr sitting on his head, tongue dangling out. She didn’t know why the snake had his tongue out, it seemed strange.

Shrugging, Darcy moved to get off the train tracks and go find Loki. That’s when her foot dipped into a puddle between the metal frame of the track and the ground. The rain had subsided, but it was still damp and cold, and the pools of water were still all stirred up. She jerked her foot, attempting to move it.

It didn’t budge.

She tried again, harder this time.

“Ow!” she whined as her toe twisted uncomfortably in her shoe. The dog tilted his head inquisitively at her.

“Hey boys, can you go find Loki? My foot is stuck pretty good here.” Darcy sighed, giving another useless tug.

Jörmungandr’s tongue flicked in response and the dog seemed to receive some kind of message as they purposefully bounded back into the forest.

Darcy was working on removing her foot, trying to shift around the dirt when she heard something…something she sometimes heard from her bedroom late at night and on kids TV shows.

Chugga Chugga! Choo Choo!
Darcy peered over her shoulder, eyes widening at the massive train coming straight at where she was situated on the track. Desperately, she tugged at her foot again, to no avail. That left her with one option, her only chance….

“LOKI!”

***

Loki checked this way and that, running back to where he last remembered hearing something from Darcy, gazing around frantically. Was she hurt? Was she in trouble? Were there more wounded animals? Was she lost?

There was a rustle of leaves and a small high pitched bark as his and Darcy’s pets ran in from a break in the trees. The puppy tugged at his pant leg while Jörmungandr slithered up his arm, curling around his knuckles in anticipation.

“Where is she?” Loki asked, hurrying in the direction the animals led him.

The healing must have worked better than Loki had hoped for the pup, because he ran like there was no tomorrow, guiding him through a familiar clearing and to some strange metal tracks.

“Loki!”

His gaze shot down a ways to Darcy. She was bent down over her foot and tugging with shaking arms at her foot. Approaching her rather quickly was what looked like a large metal beast… It was a… a…

“A train.” Loki breathed, doing quick calculations on how much time before it collided with Darcy.

About thirty seconds.

“Darcy!” he ran over to her, noticing almost half her leg was lost in a murky pool of water.

“Loki, help! I was just trying to show you a train track and then—“

“It is okay, just… just… let’s pull it out, alright?” he reasoned, forcing himself to keep a well mannered tone. He was a prince and wouldn’t break composure when he needed it most. He inhaled deeply as the three of them, Darcy, the dog, and Loki, yanked at Darcy’s leg and she groaned in protest.

“It won’t budge!”

Ten

What to do?!

Nine

“Loki, run!”

Eight

“I hate trains!”

Seven
Jörmungandr squirmed onto Darcy’s knee, mouthing her jeans.

Six

The dog whined at her leg, bumping his nose to Loki’s hand as he pulled at her ankle.

Five

Perhaps he should try the spell…

Four

If they did not move now....

Three

“Loki!”

Two

Throwing his arms around his friends, he cast the spell over the four of them, picturing Darcy’s house very clearly in his mind, the memory of her bedroom pulsating in his mind like it was the most important thing in all of Yggdrasil.

He gripped onto them harder, waiting for the impact of that dreaded train.

“Loki?” Darcy’s soft voice dipped into the silent air.

Slowly, he looked up, scared that the walls may be that of the golden Valhala or bleak Helheim rather than the comforting purple of Darcy’s room. “Darcy....”

A smile broke out across her face, cheeks splitting with glee. Her laugh sounded through the room. “We’re alive!”

The dog bounded around the room, yipping in delight and sniffing the floors of Darcy’s room, his little paws making muddy prints across their blanket fort. Loki’s head spun as he struggled to maintain consciousness. He had never exerted so much magic at one time before or spread himself so thin as to transport four sentient creatures.

He collapsed onto the ground, relaxing into the stuffed animals Darcy had slept with last night.

“Loki? Are you okay?” Darcy’s concerned voice asked.

A wet nose dabbed his cheek and the cool coil of a snake slinked onto his forehead. “I am fine, Darcy. I just….need….to rest.” He looked up at her worried expression. “I’ve used too much magic.”

Darcy’s small wet hands felt his face and neck, “Does it just make you tired? Or are you sick? Do you need medicine? I have chewable Tylenol, but that’s it. Loki…?”

He grumbled something about sleep before his body refused to move another inch and his mind brought him to a much needed sleep.

***

Darcy figured Loki just needed rest, and if he didn’t wake up, then she would try something else.
She covered Loki in a few blankets and shoved a pillow under his head. The dog was still whining next to him.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay, little dude.” Darcy assured the puppy, “You need a name. But I gave Frank his name, I guess Loki can name you.”

The puppy wagged its tail a little, sitting determinedly in front of his new friends.

Darcy sat down near Loki’s head, gently smoothing his hair back like her daddy did when she was sick. Her daddy always stayed home with her when she was sick and she liked it because she only got to see her Daddy on the weekends. He always read her new books, and poems….

“Do you like poetry, Loki?” Darcy whispered to her sleeping friend. She checked his pulse like she did in gym class after doing exercises. Two of her fingers wiggled over his neck till she found the expected steady throb.

“Oh, you’re alive. I think you’ll like poetry.” She told him, standing up and going to her bookshelf, searching for the right book. “My Daddy always reads this one poem to me when I’m sick. I don’t know if you have poems on Asgard, but they’re probably different than the ones on Midgard.” She said taking the poetry book and sitting at his side again. Jörmungandr’s tongue flicked her knuckle.

She opened to the page that her Daddy always went to and found the poem he liked. The puppy set his chin on Loki’s chest, staring at her with expectant blue eyes. “So, I guess you can just listen and we can talk about it later.”

She cleared her throat, reading aloud:

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening By Robert Lee Frost…

“Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
“My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
“He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep”

Darcy finished, setting down the book and looking down at Loki. He hadn’t changed. What if he was in a coma? What if he was dead? Hesitantly, she lifted his eyelid, revealing his green iris.

“Darcy!” called a deep masculine voice from down the stairs. Heavy footsteps began to clump up the stairs.

“Daddy!” she squeaked, leaping up to greet him, but then she remembered the unknown guests in her room. Quickly she covered all three of them with the blankets from their fort, shoving stuffed animals onto them.

Her doorknob twisted as she sat down next to the pile with her Robert Frost Poetry book. “Hi Daddy!” she ran over to him, giggling as he lifted her into the air for a sweeping hug.

“Oh, here she is! The marvelous Darcy Lewis, getting bigger every day!” he ruffled her hair, kissing her face, his scratchy chin ticking her cheek. “How’s it going Baby Doll?”

“I’m good! I went outside today and, Daddy, I have to ask you something—“

Suddenly, the pile of blankets in the floor wiggled and the husky puppy leapt out, shaking out his fur.

Darcy let out a nervous laugh, reddening at the sideways glance her father. “Can I keep him Daddy? Please?”

He sighed setting her down and kneeling next to her. The puppy immediately ran to him, jumping onto his lap and licking his face. “Darce…”

“Please, Daddy! He was all alone in a dumpster and Darius has a cat…” she begged, sitting on the floor across from her Dad, the puppy bounding over to sit in her lap, affectionately snuggling her hands. “He doesn’t have anyone else and he’s really friendly and I promise to feed him and give him baths and walk him and pick up poop and…and…pleeeeeease?” she begged, sticking out her bottom lip.

She could see her father starting to cave, his eyes avoiding hers. He sighed, “Did you ask your mother?”

She shook her head. “Can you talk to her?”

“Darce….”

“Pleeeeeease?”

The man sighed, looking from the wide blue eyes of his daughter to the adorable little pup in her arms that seemed to beg with the same bright eyes. “Alright. Fine…”

“YES!”

“…But you have to talk to your mother and this guy needs a bath.” He rubbed the puppy’s head,
“Sweet though, ain’t he? What are you going to name him?”

Darcy tapped her chin, “I don’t know yet.”

Her father stood up, a smile on his kind face. “Well, I’ll let you decide that. I think I am in dire need of a shower and a nice strong cup of coffee. Did you eat lunch?”

She shook her head, “Well, I did have a snack bar.”

“I’ll make you some soup in a bit, alright?”

“Thanks Daddy.” She said, standing up to wrap her arms around his neck and receive another kiss on the cheek.

“No problem, kid.” He chuckled, rubbing her back.

After he left, Darcy immediately ran to Loki’s side, pushing the blankets and bedding from his body. This time, when she glanced down at him worriedly, his eyes cracked open. “All clear?”

“You’re alive!” she praised, nearly leaping onto his body. Jörmungandr flicked his tongue, happily lapping at his friend’s forehead.

The puppy did the same.

Loki carefully sat up, “I’m fine, as I said, I simply exerted more magic than my body could cope with.”

Her eyebrows knit together in agitation. “Is that dangerous?”

Loki thought about that for a moment. In truth, it was very dangerous. If he did it too often, it could kill him. “I would not recommend that we travel so quickly again.”

Darcy nodded, “Maybe next time, I’ll just get my mom to drive us and you can turn invisible or something.”

Loki nodded, “And no trains next time. I do not think I like trains very much.”

“Me either.” Darcy shuddered. “Thank you, Loki. For getting us out of there.”

He smiled weakly, warmed by her gratitude. Her life was so short, how could he deny her the rest of the time they had together. “I was happy to.”

Gently, Darcy hugged him, her damp arms encircling him. He hugged her back without hesitation, her messy hair tickling his nose. They stayed like that all of two seconds before Darcy shot up, remembering something. “My Daddy said we could keep him!”

She hastily picked up the small husky puppy, rubbing his ears in joy. “And I was thinking that since I got to name Frank, even though you call him by the wrong name, I think you should name this one.”

Grinning, enthusiasm nipped at Loki’s heart. He would get to name their new friend….

“Fenrir.”

Darcy tapped her chin thoughtfully and he waited for her to tell him it was a silly name. Finally she responded, “I like it.”
Fenrir barked at his new name, licking Jörmungandr in happiness. The snake responded in turn, licking the nose of his friend.

“Truly?”

“Yeah! It’s got a nice ring to it. Fenrir and Frank. They sound good together.” Darcy assured, picking at something on her hand. “I think Fenrir needs a bath though. He’s getting dirt all over my room.”

“I agree.”

Over the next hour, Loki regained some of his strength, changing back into his armor. Darcy said she could say the suit was Darius’. Darcy’s father came out of his shower and made Darcy something called a ‘grilled cheese sandwich’. Darcy took it up to her room to eat and gave it to Loki, saying she wasn’t hungry.

“My Dad’s probably going to sleep now. He works really hard and he sits in the chair and sleeps a lot.” Darcy whispered as he finished the melted cheese sandwich. It was different than any he had eaten before, but he liked it. Yet, he noticed Midgardians ate such small portions. Darcy did not eat as much in one day as he could eat for breakfast. She retrieved the last snack bar from her backpack along with two remaining slices of pizza, all of which he ate ravenously.

“Woah, you eat a lot.” Darcy said, standing up, “Are you just really hungry, or what?”

Loki considered his reading of the Midgardian biology book he read. “Well, I suppose Asgardians use more energy to survive than Midgardians. My body simply uses it faster to maintain my magic and strength.” He explained.

Darcy nodded in understanding. “Okay, I guess that makes sense.” She crawled over to her door, cracking it open and pressing her ear to the space between the frame. “I think my Dad is asleep so we can give Fenrir a bath.”

Loki stood, eager to do so, but he remembered Asgard and his promise to be home before evening. “Darcy, I’m afraid you must continue on without me. My mother shall worry for me if I am not home soon.”

“Oh, okay.’ She looked fairly disappointed, but soon smiled. “The next time you come I’ll ask my mom if she can drive us to the Library.”

Loki nodded, a shy smile on his lips. “Or…perhaps, if you like, of course, you could visit the library at the palace on Asgard…?”

Her eyes widened to the size of platters, threatening to overtake her entire face. Loki quickly tried to defend his offer.

“If you like. I could show you my research and there are different languages of the nine realms and, well, I suppose there is quite a bit to learn. You have showed me so much of Midgard, I simply thought—“

“Are you kidding me!? I would love to go to Asgard! I didn’t know I could!” Darcy giggled, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Truly? You would like to see it?” he asked, stepping forwards to take her hands.

“Duh! Silly goose!” she said, throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly. “This is
going to be great!”

Excited, Loki scooped up Jörmungandr from the top of Fenrir’s head, “Absolutely, Darcy! I shall try to visit you tomorrow, but I’m afraid the day of my turning to Adolescence soon approaches.”

“Right, your special birthday. I get it. I’m turning ten soon, on October 3rd.” she stated, gasping in realization. “I have to get you a birthday present!”

“What?”

“A birthday present! You don’t get those on Asgard? When you get older, people give you gifts on your birthday!” She explained, picking up Fenrir.

They did receive presents on Asgard, but not every Midgardian year. Asgardian years lasted the length of four Midgard ones. “You do not have to get me anything Darcy.”

“Yeah I do! It’s your BIRTHDAY! Everybody gets things on their birthday.” She said obviously, giving Fenrir a sniff. “Pee yew.”

Loki rubbed the puppy behind his ears. “Then I should also get you something for yours in a few weeks. Yes?”

“Well, if you want to.” Darcy said, her cheeks turning pink with excitement, her messy hair framing her face.

“I do.” Loki promised, kneeling down beside her bed. “I will see you later, Darcy."

“Bye Loki.” She waved, picking up Fenrir’s paw to make him wave as well.

He slipped under her bed, thinking of Asgard and his bed where he could sleep.

When he opened his eyes, he and Jörmungandr were in the cave, hunched against the wall. Stretching, Loki walked from the cage, searching around the area for Hel. His horse stood in the clearing, drinking from the stream. He was about to call to her when he heard for the second time that day, an ear splitting scream calling his name, laced with fear and urgency.

“LOKI!”

“Thor.” Loki gasped, running over to Hel and lifting himself onto her back, Jörmungandr’s jaw slack in anticipation of what they might face next.

Chapter End Notes

Eek!
Alright, so for some reason, I've been using that time I don't have to write a crap ton of fanfiction. I've finished Worlds Apart so this will now be my main fic priority!

I've totally gotta give a shout out to Unicorn_Lady for the coolio blanket for picture,
kid Loki and Thor pics, and even a gif of a kid Kat Dennings which are impossible to find. I have tried and it is impossible. She deserves applause.

Fenrir is also a character now! yay! I just love baby animals. I can't help it. It's just their little quirks for doing the messiest most ridiculous things and yet you can't get mad at them because they're too friggin' adorable....ergh!
Next up, Loki and Thor find some equilibrium and Darcy goes to Asgard!
If you're feeling especially audacious today, please feel free to comment. If you aren't feeling especially audacious today, comment anyways because The Q Foundation of Attention appreciates your thoughts and requests for future chapters. I'm open to ideas for Darcy on Asgard....
But, of course, if you don't want to comment...I suppose you don't have to.
Thor had been quite pleased with himself by the time he reached the forest outside the city. He had ridden his horse, Gareth, straight to where they had previously encountered the bilgesnipe.

The place was still a wreck. Trees were splintered and the grass of the clearing was stomped flat. However, with time, it had taken on an earthy appeal, making the dense green around him look more inhabitable and friendly rather than the lonely wilderness he had once perceived it to be.

That’s when Thor began his search for Loki.

It was a known fact that Loki would take his horse, Hel, out whenever he left the palace. But finding Hel was not something Thor relied on. She was a skittish horse and ran from the most trusted stable-hands in all Asgard. The only one she truly obeyed was Loki, which could not truly be said because he so rarely gave her any instruction at all.

Loki treated his horse more as a friend than a pet.

All in all, finding Hel would be impossible. Thor was not keen on the idea to begin with. As mild tempered as she may be, her appearance was disturbing. Many in the palace liked to forget that Loki was a young sorcerer. Magic was not looked down on when used for healing or advancement in Asgardian technology. But there were a few who did not know Loki quite so personally that believed his magic would be used for malicious intent.

Thor doubted it.

His brother may have accidentally half killed his horse, but he did not have the heart of a true warrior like himself.

He smiled smugly, dismounting Gareth. He did not expect Loki to be anywhere near here as he said he was going to extend his research…..

Now, what did Loki study?

Thor couldn’t believe he had no answers. Wasn’t Loki always prattling on about something he read or something he thought Thor would like in a book? He studied magic, but what of that was there out here? He racked his brain.

Healers used herbs. Perhaps Loki was looking for those?

Thor rode deeper into the wood, pondering where on Asgard his brother could have possibly gone. If he had just been allowed to leave the palace sooner…..
He approached a different part of the forest. It looked nothing like Thor had ever seen. The trees were thicker and their leaves seemed to completely block out the sun from where he stood. The earth was damp, grassy, and trodden on. But it did not look like the stomped down vegetation that the bilgesnipe nested in. The ground was too moist and the grass looked like it had been ripped out in places.

He checked the dirt, noticing long slashes in the dark earth.

Talons.

Quickly, Thor drew Mjolnir. If he was faced with wild animals again, he would not run. Running was for cowards and the weak. He was neither.

Treading cautiously into the middle of the clearing, Thor tried to think of the type of animal that could dwell here. Certainly they were nothing he couldn’t handle. If Loki could survive these beasts every day, so could he.

A twig broke under his foot and the sharp little thwack stirred something in the canopy of the trees. Loud screeching sounded in his ears as eight large winged beasts descended from the darkened treetops. It was at this moment that Thor realized the canopy was not leaves, it was grass and these creatures that circled him now were more than birds. They had long sleek powerful bodies with fur and razor edged feather wings. Their beaks snapped at him in unison.

Griffins.

He clutched Mjolnir, raising it in threat.

The beasts roared together, one cracking forwards to swallow Mjolnir and would have taken his hand as well had he not let go.

Well, that left him with one option. He could not say he was proud of it, but in that moment, he was more concerned about having his insides ripped apart by winged creatures. He called for his brother.

“LOKI!”

***

Loki clutched Hel’s reins, surging forwards.

What had Thor done? Why had he come out? Was he in trouble?

He heard another scream and panic rose in his throat.

“Think, Loki, think!” he urged himself. Why would Thor come out and why would he call for him?

If he was looking for Loki, the chances are he would not call his name out so loudly. If he was out with his friends, he would not dare call to Loki for help if he was in trouble.

Loki made the assumption that his brother was indeed in trouble and indeed calling for his help. If Thor had been looking for him, where would Thor look? Not at the cave, no one knew of it but him, and it was not especially easy to find.

Quickly, Loki rushed Hel past the clearing where they met the Bilgesnipe and through the thickets. He hoped Thor had not been unthinking enough to walk into the center of the griffins’ nests. He did
not have enough energy to defend them both.

“LOKI!” Thor’s voice echoed through the forest followed by a series of rumbling squawks.

“Wonderful.” Loki muttered to himself. “Run Hel! If we want him back alive, we are going to need to get there fast. Take us to high ground.”

Jörmungandr’s tongue lolled out in determination as they surged onwards towards the darkening wood.

They approached a clearing and in the center, Loki could see Thor, unarmed, slowly backing against a tree. Seven or eight griffins with malevolent golden eyes circled him. It was obvious they were only playing with their food. Hel reared to a halt next to a tree, her bones a silent whisper compared to the racket of the griffins.

Loki thought fast. He had read about griffins, had he not? He thought hard to everything he knew about them.

They were fast. Very fast, and usually chose to attack with their beaks and claws, however their wings would slit a man’s throat quicker than the sharpest blades. They ate just about any kind of meat, and attacked in groups. They were intelligent animals and extreme strategists. They built their homes in the trees to avoid some kind of animal…he couldn’t remember….

Loki reviewed his options. He could attempt to take on the griffins with his limited magic and dagger, or he could try to outsmart them. No…he would have to do both.

Carefully, he pulled himself out of his stirrups, hoisting his feet to stand on Hel’s back. Jörmungandr slipped from his pocket to slither around in the mud and grass contentedly. With steady hands, Loki reached above his head to grasp a branch of one of the griffins’ nesting trees. If he could get up high enough, then they would have to leave Thor to attack him instead.

But where was Mjolnir? Had Thor truly left without his weapon?

Hefting himself up, Loki made his way gracefully and stealthily up the tree. Once he was high enough that the branches began to look more like sticks, Loki attached himself to a different, sturdier tree and unsheathed his dagger. “Griffins!” he shouted, holding onto the tree with one hand and gripping his blade in the other. They all turned to focus their leering eyes on him in interest. Loki thought of something to say, a reference from one of Darcy’s movies. “COME AND GET IT!”

They seemed to get the message, rearing on their hind legs and flapping their wings to reach him. Loki waited till they were all very close to conjure a ball of fire in his hand and raise it to their faces. It drained him and his foot slipped so he almost fell down an enormous height. He swallowed, keeping his gaze steady on them.

Griffins would be offended by fire. It was a threat to their nests. “Leave us alone, or I will release it.” Loki warned. It was a partial bluff. He could not hope to maintain the flame much longer as his grip on the tree was slackening and his feet slipped on the mossy branch. If he chose to attack the griffins first, though, they would surely kill him.

His threat was a gamble.

A gamble that he lost the moment one of them dove at him.

His grasp on the tree loosened and Loki released the magic, letting the energy return to his system.
Thor shouted up at him, “Loki! What do I do?!”

“Run!” Loki yelled, as they dove at him again and he threw his dagger, burying it to the hilt in one of their bodies. It was a miss and the creature hardly reacted at all. An idea occurred to him.

“THOR! Call Mjolnir!”

His brother looked up at him, confused. “What?!”

Loki tumbled backwards, falling from his branch. His heart pounded and he managed to catch himself, clutching onto the branch with both hands. A griffin advanced and he kicked it in the face.

“Young hammer! It responds to your call! Bring it forth and attack!” Loki shouted, surprise lighting his tone, “Did you truly not know of your own hammer’s capabilities!?”

Thor made a sound of unruliness, raising his hand. Loki watched in amazement as the Griffin nearest to him exploded into a mass of blood and flesh, Mjolnir appearing from its disembodiment. Blood splattered Loki’s face and body, a bit of skin hitting him in the face, a few feathers stuck to his boots. It was quite impressive.

Thor’s shining grin was visible from Loki’s suspended height as he swung his newly retrieved weapon around in circles, beckoning forth the griffins from around Loki. They tasted a new threat and flew down to Thor, no longer playing games. They dove and clawed, attacking Thor at every turn. His brother accepted their turns with ease, a smile spreading on his face as he sweat in the heat of battle.

Relieved of the threatening animals, Loki climbed down the tree nimbly. There was no way they could get out of this mess without killing another one. Griffins were proud, but because of it, they would concede in battle when they detected their own failure. They needed to gain the upper hand. Mjolnir was great, but Thor was young and did not have his full strength. He would not be able to wield it for long. His brother was already weakening.

Despite Loki’s anxiety as he reached the ground, Jörmungandr seemed quite pleased with himself as he had managed to coat his entire body in mud. His pink mouth was the only thing visible, wide open and ready for a finger to mouth on affectionately.

Loki scooped up his friend, stowing him in his pocket, mud and all. “Jörmungandr, now is not the time for games! We must focus on saving ourselves!”

He ran up to Thor, using the little magic he had remaining to conjure himself a sword. It was not the best he had made, but it would have to do. As Loki got closer to the griffins, Jörmungandr’s muddy body seemed to twitch with excitement.

Loki took to his brother’s back. “You look terrible Loki!” Thor laughed, skillfully bashing a griffin’s face aside.

“Well, some blonde idiot has almost managed to get us killed!” He teased, blocking a swipe of talons with the side of his blade.

Thor accepted the jest with a merciless laugh, slamming his hammer against one of their beaks.

“Unfortunately all of us cannot be as sly as serpents!”

Serpents.

Loki remembered now. The reason griffins built their nests up so high was to avoid the animal they feared most: The Infinite Serpent.
They were native to Asgard but were rarely heard of or seen. Any encounter with them typically ended in death as they could eat anything, their stomach acid one of the most destructive toxins in the world. Their inner muscles broke down any substance.

At that moment, Jörmungandr broke free from his pocket, mouth wide open and mud free. He slithered to the tip of Loki’s blade, coming nose to beak with one of the griffins.

Immediately it stopped attacking Loki, golden eyes widening to the size of globes. Jörmungandr let out a sound that was all too similar to Fenrir’s small yaps as he dove at the griffin, small mouth expanding to latch onto the griffin’s beak.

It was the strangest sight to see; Jörmungandr’s happy little wiggly body that spent every night on his pillow devouring an entire griffin. His mouth stretched to accommodate the beast, its great winged body disappearing into Jörmungandr’s tiny form.

The rest of the flock screeched loudly, retreating to their nests as Jörmungandr finished his meal. When he was done, he looked up at Loki with delight, slithering up his Aseir friend’s neck to rest on his head.

Thor stared dumbfounded, mouth gaping.

Loki sighed, letting out a small laugh and wiping griffin blood from his brow. “Come brother, I think you’ve seen enough of the outside world today.” He walked up to Hel who, as asked, had not moved.

Once they found Gareth, Loki and Thor returned to the palace. Loki went to bathe and study more on the animals on Asgard, and Thor ran to eat and recall every event of their battle to his friends.

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The next few days Loki spent trying to get away from the hoards of people that had flooded Asgard’s halls for the celebration of his adolescence. It was an event worthy of festivities. Not only would he begin to age faster, have his energy increase, and be given more freedoms, he would also receive his signature helm and title.

It was a tradition of Asgardian royalty and a true honor. Each member of the royal family had a certain symbol that would indicate their stature. Odin bore wings on his helm and proclaimed his label to be ‘War and Virtue’. Thor had chosen wings for his helm as well and decided his title would include ‘Thunder’. Loki thought that The Mighty Thor, Wielder of Thunder was rather elementary, but he did not argue it.

Loki did not want wings on his helm, nor did he want to have his title stand for something that represented him improperly. Also, he could not make the decision directly. A title was determined through the elders of the Asgardian court. One would kneel before them, they questioned you, you displayed your talents, and they would grant you a title.

The style of his helm he would be able to decide based on the elders’ decision.

Also for these occasions, he was to be fitted with new armor. His colors had been determined long ago and he was rather fond of green and gold. They suited him rather well.

Despite everything, what he really wanted to do was go visit Darcy. He hadn’t seen her since their sleepover and she was much better company than the countless dignitaries he was introduced to. He wanted her to see Asgard. It would be convenient for her to be there during his ceremony because of the constant presence of numerous visitors. It would not be quite so unusual for
unfamiliar people to be wandering around the castle and speaking with the prince during his becoming of adolescence.

The night before his ceremony, Loki asked his mother’s permission to go out.

“It is late Loki and it is a big day tomorrow.” She reminded a warm smile on her lips. “But I suppose you may. Will you be staying out all night?”

Loki did not know. “Perhaps. I shall be here in the morning.” He assured.

Frigga gave him a searching look. “Very well. Stay safe, my darling.”

“I will, Mother.”

He turned to leave her chambers, eager to see Fenrir and Darcy again.

“And Loki?”

“Yes, Mother?”

“I love you.”

Loki swallowed. Sentiment was not so openly displayed on Asgard as it was in Midgard and this small declaration from his mother made him smile. “I love you as well, Mother.”

With that, he walked quickly from his mother’s chambers to the stables where he collected Hel. The encounter with the griffins had somehow made her more at ease and she was now tolerating being bathed and fed by the stable-hands at times instead of retreating, by her own passage, to Nilfheim.

Together, Hel, Loki, and Jörmungandr fled into the forest, dodging around trees and branches in the night, careful not to disturb the sleeping dwellers of such a peaceful evening. Loki dismounted near the cave, “Rest now, Hel. It is late on Midgard and I suspect Darcy is asleep. I shall be back on the morn.”

Hel took him at his word, crouching into the soft sweet grass at her feet, the bones of her face nuzzling into it. Loki stroked her shoulder before hurrying to the cave.

Midgard. Midgard. Midgard….

He opened his eyes, staring at the underneath of Darcy’s bed, aware of two small bare feet pacing the floor next to him. Easily, he slipped from under her bed. “Darcy,” he whispered, “I apologize for not being here sooner.”

She turned on him, her brown hair mussed and sticking up in strange places and her blue eyes full of surprise. “Loki!” she shouted in a whisper. She threw herself at him, taking him into a hug. “I’ve missed you! I even got you a birthday present! But you can’t have it till tomorrow night.”

Loki smiled widely at his friend and soon there was a little whine at his feet. Fenrir was pouting at him, little paws padding at his knee. He bent down and lifted his pup friend, rubbing his ears. “I have missed you as well Darcy! And you, Fenrir.”

She laughed, falling onto her bed. “Man, this has been a weird week at school. Mohammed broke my glasses so now I can’t see in class. Which is alright because now I don’t have to sit in the back of the class. But it also sucks because I already know about division and multiplication and
fractions. I wish they would teach me cool things.”

She pouted and Loki went on to tell her about the things he recently learned. “Jörmungandr, you asked what kind of snake he is?”

“Uh huh.”

“He is an Infinite Serpent. They are some of the deadliest creatures on Asgard and feared above all else.” He told her, as Jörmungandr slithered over her knee.

She giggled, “Really? But he’s so cute!”

“Really.” Loki said, telling her about his adventures with the griffins. “Darcy?”

“What?”

“Would you like to come to Asgard tomorrow for the day? It is my—“

“Your birthday party!” Darcy interrupted, bouncing on the edge of the bed, unable to contain her excitement, “Yeah! I mean, I’ve got school tomorrow, but Darius doesn’t. So, I can tell my mom that I’m sick and she’ll let Darius stay home and take care of me. But he never does, he just stays in his room all the time!”

“Brilliant!” Loki said, falling back on her bed, Fenrir and Jörmungandr having some strange conversation in a mix of their different noises.

Darcy yawned, “Yeah…well, I’m tired. It’s two in the morning! I woke up to see if you were here, because you weren’t here for the last few days and I thought a bilgesnipe ate you or something. But you’re alive, so that’s okay.” She rambled tiredly, crawling into bed. “You can sleep on that side of my bed if you want. I’m too tired to make a blanket fort right now.”

Loki’s heart beat fast at this. Darcy just offered to share her bed with him? This is not how women behaved on Asgard. Not at all. In fact, such an open offer would have you cast as a courtesan for the rest of your days. But Darcy was already asleep, Fenrir curled up at her side with Jörmungandr coiled on his back.

Loki came to his senses. Darcy was not a woman yet, nor was she Asgardian. Perhaps on Midgard it was acceptable for two friends of the opposite sex to sleep in the same bed so long as their intentions were not of mating purposes. He had read in many books that is what happened in beds shared by married couples and so on.

Plus, they had already shared a space on the floor. How was this any different?

Quietly, he magicked on his sleepwear and crawled to the side of her bed by the wall she indicated to. Little did he know how tired he truly was till his head hit the pillow. He fell asleep to the fruity smell of Darcy’s hair on the sheets.

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“Loki! Wake up! And do the invisible thing!” Darcy whispered to him, shaking his chest.

He groaned, rolling over, “What time is it?”

“Five thirty.”

He groaned again, Fenrir’s wet tongue lapping at his ear. “Do I have to?”
“Loki!”

Begrudgingly, he lazily cast the spell on himself, snuggling deeper into his pillows. In the next second, Darcy’s bedroom door opened and her mother walked in, gently whispering into the room, “Darcy? Are you awake honey?”

Darcy sighed in fake tiredness. “Mom?”

“C’mon baby, it’s time for school.”

“Mom, I don’t feel so good.” Darcy said sitting up.

Darcy’s mom got closer to the bed, placing a hand on Darcy’s forehead, he suspected, to detect fever. Using a quick spell, he raised the temperature of Darcy’s skin. “You feel warm. It might be better for you to stay home today.”

“Oh, if you say so, Mommy.” She sighed, rolling onto her belly, holding Fenrir closer.

“Darcy? Is that a snake?” Her mother asked alarmed.

Darcy shook her head, “That’s Frank the Rubber Snake. He’s not real.”

“Oh. Sleep tight honey. I’ll tell Darius to look after you today. He doesn’t have school. I’m going to work. Don’t forget to drink plenty of water.”

“Okay. I love you mom.”

“I love you too.” Said her mother, kissing her daughter’s head, and smoothing back her hair.

Darcy stayed on her side till they heard the slam of the front door. She leapt out of bed and he removed the spells. “Nice touch with that hot spell! We didn’t even get the thermometer!”

Loki yawned, “I am quite gifted, I agree. Now let us sleep.”

“Loki, you’re such a lazy butt. What time does your party start?” she asked going to her closet. “And what do I wear?”

Loki didn’t answer as he was already being lulled back to sleep by the gentle weight of Fenrir on his back.

Darcy sighed, “Fine, we can sleep. But I’m setting my alarm clock for seven. We have to wake up then, okay.”

Loki was far too gone to respond.

At seven o’clock, Loki heard the most petulant beeping in all of Yggdrasil. He pulled himself from Darcy’s bed, eyes thick with sleep. He was aware of how Darcy’s alarm clock worked, as he had disassembled it twice. Yet he did not understand how any sound could be so annoying. Darcy’s messy head shot right up, eyes wide and ready. “You’re awake! I’ve been waiting for an hour now!”

Loki was not moving quite so fast. He slowly magicked on his clothing, fingers combing his hair back. “It’s still early, but I suppose we had best be back by ten.”

“Great!” Darcy said, running to her closet and pulling out a pair of jeans.
Loki shook his head, “No jeans Darcy. If you are going to go, we had best disguise you. Midgardians do not frequent Asgard.”

She snapped her fingers, putting away her jeans. “Alright, then what do I wear?”

He cupped his chin, pacing the room. “Well, I have been thinking that you could pose as one of the noble’s daughters. However, you mustn’t talk about whose family you belong to.”

Darcy nodded in agreement. “Awesome! Are you going to magic it on?”

“I am.” He smiled, holding his hands out in front of him conjuring a dress for her. It was his ceremony, so it was expected that people dress regally and would not be uncommon for many to be dressed in gold or green. He made the gown gold, floor length and with a reasonable amount of mobility. Darcy hardly ever stopped moving and she was not accustomed to the quiet, still life of Asgardian women.

The pattern was faded light green against the shiny light color of the dress and he cut it to fit her small frame. The sleeves came down to her elbows and would not get in the way of any activities they partook in. The skirt would flutter mystically as she walked. Loki rather liked the style of this dress and only the most stately nobles wore them. They were a sign of beauty on Asgard.

Lady Sigyn had one in silver that he rather admired from time to time. Of course he hardly had the chance to tell her as she was always with the Ladies or being swept away by Fandral or Thor or some other person who did not want him to have friends.

On Darcy’s wrists he made simple gold bangles and a matching collar around her neck. He debated brushing her hair, yet thought it was better just to magic it into style. He let it hang free in shiny curls, a few tendrils tied back with a purple ribbon. As an added touch, he conjured a golden circlet to lie atop her head. Attached to it was a teardrop shaped pearl that dipped between her eyebrows.

“Well, what do you think?” She asked him, hands on her hips.

Loki gestured to the mirror on the back of her door. She turned to it and gasped. “Wow. This. Looks. Awesome!”

“You like it?” Loki asked, unsure, “I have never made clothing for anyone but myself before.”

“I love it!” Darcy said, turning in circles, “Do you like it? Do I look like an Asgardian?”

Loki smiled a bit, placing his hands on her shoulders to still her constant bouncing. He gently put a finger under her chin to lift it proudly, her pouty lips poised exactly how a noblewoman’s should be. “You look beautiful, Darcy.” He assured, dropping his hand from her face.

She blushed, “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

They were quiet for a moment, heat creeping up Loki’s neck until at last Fenrir let out a little whine, scratching at the door. “He has to go outside to pee.” Darcy said lifting the puppy.

Loki gestured to the bed, “Shall he go on Asgard then? I guarantee, it is closer than your front door.”

Darcy rushed over, frowning at the underneath of the bed. “Loki, I don’t know. What if it doesn’t work?”
“What do you mean?”

Darcy tapped her chin, “I’ve hidden under my bed lots of times, but I never went to Asgard.”

He nodded, “I suppose, to activate the portal, there is some magic involved.”

She nodded, “Are you going to pass out again?”

“Of course not. You have seen me use magic countless times. Transporting multiple beings through space and time however….”

Darcy nodded again, “Alright then! Let’s go!”

Loki took her hand, Jörmungandr in his pocket and Fenrir in Darcy’s arms, and pulled them under her bed. “Think Darcy, with everything you have, of Asgard.” He whispered to her, “And we shall be there.”

He gripped her hand tighter, clenching his eyes shut as he felt the burst of rainbow light and the churn in his stomach as they passed between realms. When he opened them again, he was staring at the wall of the cave next to a bewildered Darcy Lewis. He had never seen her speechless.

“Holy moley.” She breathed, getting shakily to her feet. “We really did it. I’m on Asgard!”

“You are indeed. Would you like to see it?” he asked her.

“Duh!” she said, setting down Fenrir, who immediately bounded from the cave to relieve himself in the grass.

He took Darcy’s hand, pulling her from the stone walls and into the bright light of day. Hel was standing in the field, giving Darcy an unsteady look. Darcy’s blue eyed gaze roamed the field and the forest, falling on Hel. She jumped a little at first, but he had told her of his horse and what had happened to her a couple weeks ago, so her reaction was minute compared to others who had met her.

“Is that Hel?”

“Yes.” Loki said, approaching his horse slowly. Thankfully she did not move; only continue her one eyed stare at Darcy Lewis, her skeletal side shifting. “There’s no need to be scared, Hel. She will not hurt you. See?” he took Darcy’s hand and placed it on the bone of her shoulder. “Darcy is my friend.”

A blush crept into Darcy’s cheeks as she pet the ivory colored bone. “She is very pretty.”

Loki’s insides relaxed. He had been worried that Darcy’s reaction would be the same as everyone else’s. That she would be disgusted by his different friend. But she accepted her with the same grace she had accepted him. “You like her?”

“Yeah. Does she like me?” Darcy asked, bringing her other hand up to caress the flesh side of Hel’s face.

The mare leaned into Darcy’s touch, unafraid. “I believe she does. Very much so.”

Fenrir had finished with his business and was now running towards them, tongue lolling out much like Jörmungandr’s. The small snake slithered from Loki’s pocket to the top of Hel’s head, waiting for his friends to join him.
Darcy giggled, “Frank!”

For the first time all week, Loki was excited about the celebration of his adolescence. “Come.” Loki said, placing his foot in the stirrup, lifting himself onto Hel. “Let us go to the palace and I can give you your birthday present.”

Darcy’s smile outshone the Asgardian sun as she picked up Fenrir, putting him in front Loki on the saddle. She did as Loki had done by shifting her golden shoed foot into the stirrup and accepting Loki’s hand to help her up. She situated herself behind him, wrapping her arms around his body.

“Onward, Prince Loki!” she said in an awful mockery of his accent.

Loki grinned from ear to ear, following her command. “Hold on tight, Lady Darcy.” He chided, gripping the reins of his majestic black horse, “Hel likes to run.”

She gripped tighter around his middle as they surged towards the golden city, the rising morning sun silhouetting them on a day dedicated to Mischief.

Chapter End Notes

Do you like what I did there? Did you see it? The 'day dedicated to Mischief'? Get it? Because it's Loki's birthday and they're going to go find some trouble to get into? Alright, so I thought it was pretty clever and I can never turn down a good pun. Ever. It needed to happen.

I told you Darcy was going to Asgard! I mean, nothing has happened yet, but it will. There's so much that I want to put in and next chapter is going to be a monster. A monster chapter! I mean, I already write long chapters, it's kind of ridiculous. But there's just so much I want for Darcy vs. Asgard I just...*sigh*

Also, if you are an observant reader, then you know I have terrible grammar. If you're an especially observant reader then you may have noticed that my grammar hasn't been nearly as terrible these last two chapters. My work is officially being beta'd! Taadaa! Getting down to business with this serious fanfiction writing!

Thank you everyone for your kudos and comments and stuff. I super appreciate any kind of feedback. Even if you want to yell gibberish, I'm cool with that. I'm open to suggestions or requests for the future, so go ahead and do that if you like. And if you don't like, then don't.
Frank Brings Guests

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emma Lewis sat in the middle of Darcy’s school parking lot her head on the steering wheel and phone in hand.

She’d been called in for an emergency meeting with Darcy’s teacher during her lunch break.

She thought she had always been a good parent. She tried to teach her kids about all of the good things in life and educate them about everything they may need to know. As far as she knew, Darcy was a kind girl with a sweet heart and a slightly hyperactive attitude.

According to Darcy’s teacher, she was loud, disruptive, and inattentive during class. She did not have any friends and at recess she read books instead of playing with the other kids. Her teacher said when her classmates tried to engage her in their games, there was always a fight, and somehow Darcy was always right smack in the middle.

Did Darcy have bruised or scrapes?

Yes. But she figured those were just from playing. Darcy had told her, when she asked about the little scratch on the side of her face, that she had been playing with her friend Mohammed when her glasses broke.

Also, Darcy’s homework was never done. Sometimes it was half finished or not even started. Sometimes there was cursive in green crayon written on the side, talking about everything from light switches to mathematical shapes. Even more than all that, every test Darcy took, she passed. One hundred percent on every one.

“I just don’t think Darcy is very interested in what we’re learning. She doesn’t take her homework or class seriously. Several times a day she asks me why she is forced to sit through ‘such torturous lessons’. I think it would benefit her to move up a grade.” Ms. Greenwood had told her with a sigh. “She also does not follow instruction. She has had several detentions already this year for moving around during times she isn’t supposed to be. Just yesterday, the class was taking a spelling test and she stood up to go look up how to spell the words. When I asked her why she would do such a thing in the middle of the spelling test she said, ‘because, Ms. Greenwood, I needed to spell those words, and I wasn’t going to learn from writing them down wrong.’ She then proceeded to name off all the spelling words and spell them correctly: Galapagos, dementia, garish, petulant, tyrannosaurus, minute, and decorations.”

Emma Lewis made plans with the school to move Darcy up a grade next week. But it worried her.

Would it be worse for Darcy in middle school? What a ridiculous question, middle school was worse for everybody. She was small for her age…. And she had no friends? How did this happen?
Had Darcy really managed to let her think everything was okay? She spent a lot of time alone in her room too…

What if she was one of those parents who raised a sociopath and didn’t even realise it?

Emma Lewis paled, dialing her husband’s phone number. “Michal?”

“Hey honey? What’s up?”

And that’s when she cried, venting her sorrows to her concerned husband. “I just don’t know what to do. She’s at home sick right now….I just…I can’t believe I missed all of this! She must be so miserable…Oh, Michal, our baby….”

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On Asgard….

Darcy clung to Loki as they trotted up golden steps to a sparkling palace, her bright laugh filled Loki’s ear. “This is where you live?” Darcy breathed her mouth agape.

Loki chuckled nervously, “Yes. I am a prince.”

“It’s amazing! Can we go in?” she asked as Loki slid off his horse near a stable, offering his hand to help Darcy down. She accepted it, leaping to the ground. Fenrir hopped into her arms, Jörmungandr on his head.

“Oh course! It is my home.” Loki said, offering her his arm. It was strange to partake in such an Asgardian custom with Darcy. Though, he found he rather liked it. For once, she was not moving quickly. Rather, she was rooted to her place on the ground, eyebrows crinkled. “Loki, what if I don’t fit in right?”

Loki felt his heart thud a little. Did he not feel this way every day of his life? The only time he did feel like he fit in right anywhere was when he and Darcy were together. But looking at her now, he was surprised she was not born an Asgardian noblewoman.

“Darcy Lewis, you are the most charming maiden in all of Yggdrasil. You’re smart and unafraid and your birthday present is in that palace.” He told her, placing his hands on her shoulders, watching as her mild, doe eyed expression evolved into a smile.

“Well, when you put it that way!” she said, gripping onto his arm, “Let’s go. Doesn’t your party start soon?”

Loki smiled back, “We have time. Come, before everyone is up and about for the day.”

Together, they walked (quite quickly, it would have been running, but Princes do not run) into the gardens where Darcy asked him about every breed of plant and its purpose. Her curious blue eyes reflected the scene before her. Fenrir and Jörmungandr followed, chasing each other around bushes and fountains.

Inside the palace, they managed to slow their pace to a brisk walk, Loki taking Darcy through the halls, breezing around the throne room and to the dining hall. There, Loki avoided the eyes of his brother’s friends as Darcy gripped his arm. He had not thought at all about them. What would they think of his friend?

Oh no, what if Thor tried to take her away? Or Fandral?!
Darcy was his friend. Not theirs.

“I believe I must go to my chambers soon, Lady Darcy, to prepare for the day. Would you like your present now?” Loki asked, turning them swiftly away from the dining hall.

“Yes! Is it in your room? Can I see your room? Is it big? I bet it’s a lot bigger than my room. Does it have a bathroom in it? I bet it does.” Darcy rambled, as they hurried up a flight of stairs where nobles were descending for their breakfast in the hall.

“It does. But that is not where we are going.” Loki said, rushing them through down the hall to the large golden doors that opened to his favorite place in all of Asgard.

He pushed one open, looking around to make sure no one was there. “Alright, close your eyes.”

Excitedly, Darcy clenched her eyes shut.

“You’re peeking.”

“Am not!”

“Yes you are! And you’re a very bad liar.” Loki criticized, guiding her inside, his hands covering her eyes. Lady Asta was sitting on her usual chair, a book in her lap. She raised a brow at Loki, smiling at his guest. Loki flushed. Of course his mother’s ladies would now tease him. But at least it was with friendly intentions.

“Loki! Come on, I want to see!” Darcy cried impatiently, wiggling under his hands.

“Are you sure? I do not think you want to.” He jested, leading her away from Lady Asta who winked at him.

He stopped when she ripped off his hands, her mouth open prepared to say something snarky back, but stopped. Her jaw was slack, much like Jörmungandr’s when he was looking for a cuddle. “Oh my goodness.”

Her eyes raked over the endless shelves of books and Loki could see her mind working on which one she wanted to read first. “Loki…it’s…it’s…”

“…not your birthday present.” He finished, offering her his arm again.

Stunned, Darcy took it as he guided her through the shelves to his usual table where he sat her down in the chair across from where he sat. Her feet did not touch the floor and she took the liberty to swing them back and forth. Loki talked to her, “This is the library of the Realm Eternal. It has every copy of every book ever made in Asgard, Vanahelm, and Alfheim. It holds the oldest books in Yggdrasil and a wealth of knowledge that I cannot even begin to explain.” He said. “Most books are in Norse. It was a language on Midgard a while ago, though I suspect it has been long since lost. But there are other languages as well. It would be impossible for you to read any books in here.” Loki said, a twinkle in his green eyes.

Darcy’s obvious heartbreaking disappointment put it out. So he continued quickly, “Which leads me to your birthday present.” He turned to the nearest shelf, shuffling a few books aside till he pulled out an extremely old tome, its cover black with faded illegible marks; the writing inside glowed golden.
“This book is what taught Asgardians to decipher other languages. It possesses a very strong spell, one that has been known to not wear down with time or use. It will allow you to speak, understand, read, and write any language. Most Asgardians are born with the ability to speak everything...but to read it...write it...understand it...that is the gift.” He said, his green eyes glazing over. Personally, he had tried to make out what spell the book held and had spent many sleepless nights at this table pouring over it. But to no avail. It was so ancient that it would take another relic to decipher it.

A relic like the tesseract.

Darcy stared at him, her eyes shining with questions that her pouty mouth was holding back.

“I want you to read it.”

“Really?” she asked, “That’s...a really awesome present.”

Loki nodded, “You are smart Darcy. This will help you to discover all the things you wish. It will make finding the tesseract easier, I think.”

She laughed, jumping up and wrapping her arms around his middle in a tight hug. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you!”

Loki sat next to her as she opened the cover, letting her eyes trail over the golden script. Her irises flashed gold for a moment as she turned the page and the color deepened. She waited a few more seconds before closing the book. “I...wow.”

“What do you think?” he asked, steadying her shoulders.

“I think...” Darcy began, her blue gaze sweeping the tall shelves, “I think I’m ready to read. I’m ready to read everything.”

Loki grinned ear to ear, magicking the tome back to where it belonged and holding out his arm for Darcy to take, “Shall we search for a tesseract?”

Darcy giggled and stood, linking their arms, “We shall!”

They were two steps forwards when a tall blonde woman dressed in a long golden dress appeared in front of them. “Hello, Mother.” Loki greeted, his cheeks reddening. His mother would know it was unlike him to be guiding young ladies around the library.

The Queen looked down at Loki and his friend with a warming smile. “Good morning, Prince Loki. I am happy to see that you have made it back this morning as you said. I believe it is time for you to go prepare for the ceremony.” She said a twinkle in her eye. “But please, introduce us, Loki.”

Without even a break Loki gestured from Darcy to his mother, “Lady Darcy, this is my mother, Frigga, Queen of Asgard. Mother, this is my friend Lady Darcy.”

Darcy inclined her head, staring up at the queen, mouth ajar. “Uh, hi. You don’t look a lot like Loki. Or maybe it’s that Loki doesn’t look a lot like you. Are all people on Asgard blonde? I love this library. Does everyone spend a lot of time here? I’ve never used a library this big. I have a small one at home, but it isn’t really a library because I can just take books whenever I want. But I like to—“

Loki panicked as Darcy’s tendency to prattle went into full effect. He relaxed only slightly at his
mother’s barely repressed shake of the shoulders. “Mother, I will escort Lady Darcy to the dining hall and go to my chambers immediately after.”

Frigga waved him off, “Loki, please. Lady Darcy and I will go down together and you can meet us when you are ready. Is that quite alright, Lady Darcy?”

Darcy grinned, the little pearl between her brows dangling at a strange angle. “Yes. I’m really hungry, actually.”

Loki reluctantly released Darcy’s arm, noticing for the first time, the absence of Fenrir and Jörmungandr. “Ah, I will see you later then, Lady Darcy. Keep an eye out for your friends.” He said, hoping she understood.

Realization flashed in her eyes and she momentarily looked about them. “Okay. I will.”

“Very good.” He said, taking her hand and placing a kiss on the back of it. Such custom was expected on Asgard and if he did not partake in it with a noblewoman, his mother would skin him alive.

Darcy blushed and nodded, turning back to the Queen as Loki walked away, now wishing that he had more time with Darcy in the library. Oh the things they could learn together….

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Darcy walked next to the Queen giggling uncontrollably as the tall, beautiful woman told her about the troubles they had to go through to get ready for today’s ceremony. Many included spilling mishaps or Loki doing something completely right while everyone else messed it up. She was in the middle of telling her how bored Loki had been with the preparations and all the silly things he did to make it interesting.

“And then, we all looked around for where he went, and do you know where he was?” Frigga asked, folding her hands in front of her.

“Where?” Darcy asked, eager to know all the things she had missed out on last night because of her tiredness. Loki would have to tell her all of these stories when they were alone again.

“In the library, looking up how to play an Alfheimian pipe flute correctly.” Frigga said and Darcy burst into giggles, holding her belly.

“Can he play it now?” Darcy asked.

“Well I hope so. He made a big show of how to keep a proper beat with it instead of trailing off as the pipe flutist had.” Frigga explained, eyeing Lady Darcy with curiosity. She was by no means reserved in any form. She was so unlike Loki who would barely smile wider than necessary to be polite. This girl openly laughed and cackled with absolutely no shame. It was an enchanting sound, and Frigga was delighted to keep it going.

At last they reached the dining hall where she bid Lady Darcy goodbye, “If you would like, Loki usually sits by his brother, Prince Thor. He is different from Loki, but you may wait for him there.”

Darcy squinted to find the end of the table Frigga gestured to. “Thank you, Queen Frigga.”

“It was a delight, Lady Darcy.”

The short girl walked away, her brown curls bouncing across her shoulders as she boldly
approached the end of the table where five older looking kids sat, each of them talking and laughing. “Uh, hi. Can I sit here?”

Their gazes turned to her and their laughter and chatter died. Darcy felt a little like she needed to square her shoulders to make herself look bigger and tougher. It didn’t really work at school, but it was worth a shot.

A blonde kid with longish hair and a white grin gestured for her to sit down. Darcy did so, pulling out her chair to sit in it. She noticed his attire, and the winged helm on his head. She remembered Loki’s description of his brother. “Thank you, Prince Thor.”

He nodded to her, a smile coming across his lips. Darcy thought he looked a little haughty, like he thought he was a lot cooler than he was. She went to school with a lot of kids like that. “It is nothing, Lady…?”

“Lady Darcy.” She said, turning to her plate which was laden with thick grapes, bread, cheese, as well as delectable looking meat and eggs.

A larger boy with the beginnings of a beard and mustache was practically inhaling everything in front of him; whereas an Asian looking kid was silently scowling at his eggs as he scooped them into his mouth. A tall blonde girl was eating, but also glaring at Darcy, as though she disliked everything about her. That glare made Darcy want to bury her face in her plate.

The other blonde boy that sat across from her smiled and Darcy blushed. No one usually smiled at her like that. She smirked, picking up her fork and knife the way her British family members taught her to.

“Lady Darcy, you are quite a sight this morning. I am Fandral, the Dashing.” He introduced himself, taking the hand Loki kissed and placing a new one there. A newer, longer, wetter one. Darcy yanked her hand away in shock, wiping it on the side of her dress. “Dude, you spit on my hand!”

In an instant, the tension that had built up since Darcy sat down disappeared in a roar of furious laughter from Thor, the almost-bearded kid, and the girl. Even the quiet one cracked a grin. Prince Thor clutched his stomach, “Fandral, I told you to go easy on the tongue, yet you persisted!”

Fandral had turned an odd shade of pink and Darcy couldn’t help but giggle a bit. “Spitters are quitters.” Darcy said. She heard a couple of the kids on the playground say it while other kids had spitting contests. The teachers heard and got really mad, but she couldn’t imagine why.

The blonde girl’s eyes widened to the size of Darcy’s egg yolks, before bending over in laughter. “And you call yourself a lady! Where are you from? Do you fight?”

Darcy racked her memory. That must be Thor’s friend, Sif. She did not like to be called a lady. “I am a lady. I’m from Asgard.”

“From which province?” she questioned.

Darcy thought of what Loki had told her of Asgard. “Um, Nornheim.”

“Ah,” said the bearded one knowingly, “I hear they are less strict there. My Lady Darcy, I am Volstagg.”

“I am Sif.” Said the girl, “And that’s Hogun. He doesn’t say much.” She said, pointing with her fork to the quiet dark haired kid.
“Oh, nice to meet you I guess.” She said, stabbing one of her grapes and eating it as Thor began to start up a conversation about his hammer.

Fandral seemed to have found his voice again, “Lady Darcy, forgive me for asking, but did I not see you on the arm of Loki?”

“Loki?” Thor asked, looking at Darcy, “I have not seen you in his presence before.”

Darcy finished chewing before speaking. “Well, let’s see, I guess we met this morning and he showed me around. He’s really nice.”

Four of them laughed, Thor taking a rough bite of the meat on his place. “Truly? You enjoy the company of my brother?”

Darcy crossed her arms, becoming frustrated with Thor. “Yeah. You don’t?”

Thor scoffed, “Well, I would if I enjoyed expanding on the use of magic in battle or knowing everything there is to know about anything completely pointless.”

Darcy felt a slow burn of rage at the group as they laughed. A small body slid across her foot and slithered up her leg onto her hand as another fluffier body collapsed at her feet, panting. Darcy smiled at Frank, who happily flopped onto her plate to swallow a grape. Darcy remembered Loki’s story about him from last night.

“Pointless things? You mean like griffins?” Darcy asked taking a bite of her bread and staring straight ahead.

Everyone but Thor laughed at this. “Oh, she is feisty. She may have bested you Thor. Had Loki not known about their—“

“Enough!” Thor bellowed, slamming his goblet on the table, he looked to Darcy, brows set when his eyes fell upon Jörmungandr. He jumped back, “What is that doing here?”

Darcy looked down at Frank. “What do you mean? He’s Loki’s.”

“Yes I understand that he is—“

“Good morning Thor, Sif, Hogun, Fandral, Volstagg,” greeted an easy voice from behind Darcy’s chair. “Hello again, Lady Darcy.”

Darcy stood to see Loki wearing what she assumed to be his armor. It was gold and green, metal frames with circles going down the sides. Darcy liked it and he really did look like a prince. “Hello, Loki.”

“Lady Darcy, I apologize for the interruption earlier. How fares your morning meal?” he asked bowing his head to her, a smirk on his face.

Darcy repressed the urge to crack up as she curtsied back. “It is not problem at all Prince Loki. I believe I have finished.”

Loki’s expression lightened and Darcy thought of every princess movie ever, and Loki fit the Prince for every single one. He was the prince and today, she was a princess. Well, really she was a noblewoman, but same thing. “Then you would not object to seeing the rest of the library?”

“I—“
“Loki! You cannot just barge in and interrupt the Lady’s meal.” Thor chastised, standing up and throwing his shoulders back. Darcy wanted to gasp. Loki was taller than her, but Thor was taller than Loki. Not by much, but he was big for a kid. He had broad shoulders and long arms and radiated…might.

Loki raised his brows in shock, “Lady Darcy claimed she was finished. She enjoyed the library earlier—“

Thor grimaced, “But Loki, today is your day. You do not have time for such things.”

“No?” Loki questioned politely, though Darcy could see the brewing annoyance. Loki was never annoyed around her. “Because, dear brother, I have memorized the schedule and, as it happens, there is an hour left of breakfast before the sparring matches begin.”

“Indeed!” Thor said, crossing his arms, “And I wish for the Lady Darcy to be there when I challenge you to a duel.”

Loki raised an elegant brow and Darcy wondered how he did it. She couldn’t raise an eyebrow…just both of them. She shook her head, bringing her mind back to the situation at hand. “Wait a second, why are you being so mean?”

Thor turned to Darcy in confusion. “What?”

“Why. Are. You. Being. So. Mean.” Darcy repeated slowly, “Loki just came over here so we could go to the library, which is kinda awesome because you can learn all about Yggdrasil and stuff. And then you just had to get angry about nothing. Was it the griffins? Maybe you should go read some books so that next time you go out, you won’t have that problem.” She suggested, taking Loki’s arm as Thor’s friends began to laugh.

She quickly went for feeling bitter to feeling remorseful. It wasn’t nice to be laughed at. “But…” Darcy said, “It was smart of you to call forth your hammer like that. Loki told me it was awesome.”

Thor went from looking confused to angry, to confused again, to flattered, to accepting. “I…thank you Lady Darcy, and Loki. Forgive me, I should not have been so rude in front of a lady.” He bowed his head to Darcy, taking that hand that Fandral hand not kissed to peck his lips politely against it.

Darcy smiled at him before walking off with Loki.

“Oh, and brother?” Thor called, beginning to snigger. “I still expect to see you in the sparing pit in an hour. We fight! And the victor wins a dance tonight with the Lady Darcy!”

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Darcy was poring over a book of spells with great interest and Loki paced, practicing different enchantments. “I don’t really want to dance with Thor.”

“No one wants to dance with Thor, he is as graceless as he looks.” Loki said, kneading his brow. He could not understand why his brother must ruin everything. Though, a certain burst of pride shot through him as he remembered Darcy’s outward speech towards the warriors. It was as much of a shock to them as it had been for Loki the first time.

“So, just beat him in sparring or whatever.” Darcy said simply, petting Jörmungandr as he lay across her books. Fenrir, it appeared, had been off terrorizing Asgard and was content to doze with
the late morning sun on his back.

“I cannot simply beat him Darcy. Thor is better skilled at fighting and he knows it! That is why he challenged me! To put me to shame.” Loki stated plainly, letting his fingers drift over a couple books.

Darcy shook her head, “Loki, you’re smart though. C’mon, just think about it, look at all these spells! Why don’t you fight him with any of these?”

Loki pressed his lips together, “I do not wish to kill Thor. I wish to best him. That book is solely for offensive fighting spells.”

Darcy closed the book, fingering the cover of another that was written in some runic lettering. “What about ‘The Art of Illusion’?”

Loki had read it, of course, and he knew the spells from it. But what good would they be in besting Thor? Darcy began to read off the different spells. “Duplicating one’s self, duplicating one’s self with a conscious mind, multiplying one’s self, the corporeal illusion, deceptive theory, invisibility, sense loss, fear…. Loki, this book is filled with stuff that could be useful!”

Loki finally caught on to Darcy’s scheme, snapping his fingers. “You are right, Darcy! How could I not see it before!? I do not need to be good at fighting to actually brawl or win battles!”

“Cool! What are you talking about!?” she asked, standing up with him.

“My mother!” Loki said, pacing back and forth, his hand cupping his chin. “I misunderstood what she said to me about balance! Do you remember? I told you about it.”

“Yeah. That you and Thor had to have balance. He had strength and you’re really smart.” Darcy remembered.

“Exactly.” Loki muttered, “I was wrong. She sent Thor out to get me in the hope that we would realize this, but it didn’t happen. I still drew my sword and Thor still acted dull. My mother said balance, Darcy. She meant that I should use magic and my intelligence to accommodate my fighting and that Thor should use his strength to enforce his good will and what little he has learned.” Loki said, relieved.

Darcy nodded in understand. “Cool! So can you explain the sparring to me? I don’t get it. You just fight or what?”

Loki pursed his lips, “Well, there are several challengers to go up against the Chosen, that is me. These challengers will face the Chosen one at a time and the council will watch the fight in order to assess my strengths and weaknesses. Later on they will assign me a title and helm based on how well I do.”

Darcy thought about this. “So, it’s like a test. Like for Midgard schools. You spend all your time just trying to do well so that you can get a good grade?”

“That is the general idea.” Loki said studying the spells.

Darcy leaned over his shoulder, “I think you should do the double one. It sounds cool.”

Loki smiled lifting his hands and casting the spell to create a corporeal copy of himself. At first it used a similar amount of magic as conjuring simple objects, but he knew that controlling it would drain further magic from him. The double smiled, “Hello, Darcy.”
“Are you making him say that?” Darcy asked, poking Loki’s double in the side.

“Obviously.” Said the duplicate and the real Loki smiled, wielding the magic in his mind so that his doppelganger drew his dagger and began to spin it around his fingers as the real Loki would.

“I feel as though this idea holds potential.” Loki said waving his hand and letting the double disappear.

Darcy’s eyes were filled with excitement. “Man, I wish I could do magic. It’s amazing.”

Loki held back his flustered feelings. Of course, Darcy was the only one who truly felt that about his magic. He was about to tell her about the dangers of magic in mortals and the magical reimbursements that must be dealt with to fix the damage.

But at that moment there was a light cough and Loki spun on his heel to see none other than Lady Sigyn, dressed in the silver gown and looking quite beautiful. “Lady Sigyn, good day. How fares your morning?”

He felt as though he spoke too quickly and immediately grasped his senses. He was a prince and he would act like one.

“I am well, Prince Loki, thank you. Her majesty the Queen has sent me to tell you that your sparring shall begin shortly. She wishes that the Lady Darcy sit with her ladies today.” She spoke softly and Loki could not help but find the stark contrasts and comparisons between her and Darcy. Both were lovely, he admired them, and wished to dance with them.

Darcy, he hoped, would like it. Her curiosity and mystification with the world was something he needed. She helped him to learn things he never dreamed of and shared his thirst for knowledge. Darcy Lewis was his truest of friends.

Things were different with Sigyn. She was so proud and would one day be the maiden with whom all the men desired courtship. But he did not want her as a prize like Fandral boasted of so often. He wanted to show Sigyn that ladies could be more like Sif or Darcy. They could learn and explore and fight if it pleased them.

“Thank you, Lady Sigyn.” He said, taking a step towards her. She tentatively took a step as well and he reached forwards to take her hand and give it a quick kiss. “The Lady Darcy and I shall be done shortly.”

She nodded once, calm and restrained, like most Asgardian women were. Though he did notice the slight reddening in her pale cheeks. “I shall tell your mother. Good day, Prince Loki.”

And with that, she was gone, leaving Loki to watch after her.

Darcy’s giggle broke him from his stare. “You like her.”

“What?”

“You like like her!” Darcy continued, clutching her side.

“Honestly, you are no better than my hooligan brother, Darcy. She is an admirable lady. That is all.” He told her, putting away his books.

Darcy did a terrible job of stifling her giggle in her palm. “You still like her.”
“Then should I also say that you like Fandral? Let the courtship begin and you can be married by the end of the day!” he teased back, poking her in side just like she usually did to him.

She laughed harder, making a very unladylike noise that simulated sickness. “Gross! No way! Take it back!”

Loki smiled, offering her his arm, “I don’t think I will. Come, Lady Darcy, so that you can impress him by way of stature and wit.”

She hopped up, taking his arm. “You’re talking like a prince.”

“You are talking like a Midgardian.”

“I am a Midgardian.”

“Exactly.”

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Darcy stood nervously in the crowd of pretty women who smiled lightly and tittered at jokes Darcy didn’t understand. They all pooled on a golden balcony that looked over a circular arena, Loki standing off to one side.

Loki had taken her to stand with the ladies before he was summoned away to prepare for his fights. Darcy followed them in, desperately searching for the queen. She spotted her in the next balcony standing next to a white haired man with an eye patch and a helm like Thor’s, only with little curly horns.

That must be Loki’s father, Odin. King of Asgard.

Darcy giggled. He looked like a pirate.

Suddenly, the arena burst into applause, cheering and shouting. She leaned over the edge of her balcony to see Loki, dressed in his armor, walk to the center. Or, at least she thought it was Loki. She had terrible eyesight and her glasses hadn’t been replaced yet. But she cheered as well, pumping her fist in the air. “Go Loki!”

She squinted down as Odin in the balcony next to her began to speak. “Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, today is the marking of your two thousandth year since birth. In this time you have grown, become educated in the ways and rights of Yggdrasil, sharpened your skills of tongue, arm, and mind, and you have learned the values of life without the power of a full Aesir.”

Everyone cheered, including Darcy, though she was quite confused by what he meant when he said ‘two thousandth year since birth’. Loki wasn’t two thousand, was he?

Odin continued and Darcy thought she saw a smile begin on his lips. “Your title, as Asgardian Royalty and a Defender of the Nine Realms, shall be determined today!” he raised his staff and Darcy decided she wanted one someday. Maybe when she was president…

“Loki Odinson, your first opponent of ten, Hogun the Grim!” Odin announced, pounding his wicked awesome staff.

Darcy stared down as the quiet boy from earlier walked into the arena, a roundish spiky mace in his hand. Darcy gasped. “Don’t die, Loki! I can’t see you at all but don’t die!”
She watched as they circled each other, green and gold flashing here and there. Darcy wished she could be closer. She turned to the person next to her, “Hey, can you tell me what’s happening. I can’t see anything down there.”

Her gaze focused on the pretty blonde girl from earlier that Loki had a crush on. She was taller than Darcy and she held her head high like Loki had made her earlier. She attempted to mimic it. Lady Sigyn’s blonde brow crinkled, “Why can you not see?”

Darcy remembered what Loki had said about glasses and how Asgardians did not have trouble with sight. Quickly she came up with a lie. “Well, I was practicing my magic this morning and then ala-kazam! I misfired a spell and it got in my eye. Loki said he would help me with it later.”

Sigyn looked mildly concerned. “How…unfortunate. What is ala-kazam?”

“An expression.” Darcy said, looking down at the arena at now multiple shiny gold and green blurs. “Can you explain what’s happening?”

Lady Sigyn nodded, “Hogun has just dropped his mace in attempt to grab at Loki. Loki has made multiples of himself, not all of them corporeal. It is almost impossible to tell the difference.”

Somewhere in her accounting of the events, Darcy noticed her tone moved from haughty boredom to simplistically impressed. “Loki can do a lot of magic. He’s great at it.”

“Indeed.”

“What do you think about it?”

Sigyn gave her a strange look. “What?”

Darcy tried again, focusing on the blurs as loud horns sounded across the arena. “What do you think about Loki’s magic and stuff? He’s really good at it and he just won a fight with it. Can you do magic too? Or do you fight? I think that one girl fights. Sif?”

The young lady stared at her, obviously dumbfounded. “Men do not typically wield magic as Prince Loki does. Nor does anyone lest they be an advanced sorcerer. Magic is more commonly used for advancement in Asgardian technology or healing. Loki uses it for….”

“…Everything.” Darcy finished, turning to look at Odin make another announcement.

“And now, the second opponent of ten, Fandral the Dashing!” Odin blared and Darcy leaned forwards to catch a glimpse of silvery light.

“But you like Loki?” Darcy asked, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand.

Sigyn cleared her throat, “I beg your pardon.”

“Come on, you like him don’t you?” she teased, elbowing the lady in the side. “Eh? Eh? Eh?”

Lady Sigyn looked appalled, her cheeks turning darker and darker by the second. “He…he is my Prince…I…I appreciate his position…” she trailed off and looked at the battle shyly, “And I suppose he is quite kind.”

Darcy giggled in response and Sigyn, after failing to maintain a disapproving look, joined her.

They talked through the rest of the matches, Sigyn occasionally telling Darcy a specific move or
style that the competitors used. But mostly, Darcy asked questions about Sigyn’s life on Asgard and what she did. Apparently, the life of a Lady was boring and most of what you did was sit around and practice talking or studying small bits of magic. After a few more minutes of talking, Sigyn even began to gossip.

“Fandral really is terrible sometimes.” She admitted in a whisper, hands folded in front of her. “It is wrong of a lady to turn down a request for outings unless they already have prior reservations. But he is most impolite and conceited.”

“He gives bad hand kisses.” Darcy commented, looking at the back of her hand in remembrance of breakfast.

“Quite true! Sometimes I think he must be part animal, drooling over ladies hands like such!” Sigyn covered her mouth with her palm in order to stifle the threatening outburst.

They cheered when Loki won a round against Volstagg. Sigyn spoke up again, but meekly. “Lady Darcy?”

“Yeah?” Darcy asked turning her attention away from Odin as he announced someone else to go fight Loki.

“Forgive me if I am wrong, but there is word going around that Loki had a young lady come in this morning on his horse. That he is perhaps considering a courtship with her. Was that lady you?” she asked and Darcy could tell she really wanted to know.

“Oh yeah, I did go on a ride with Loki this morning. He was showing me around the city. I am from Nornheim you know. I was up early and he was up early so we went on a ride. It was nice. But I don’t think we’re doing the court-thingy. I mean, he’s my friend.” Darcy explained and Sigyn’s shoulders visibly relaxed.

“I understand. Thank you Lady Darcy.”

Darcy smiled, turning her wide blue eyes to the girl next to her, “You can call me Darcy if you want. Since we’re friends and stuff.”

Sigyn’s mouth turned up at the corners, “We are friends?”

“Of course!”

The horns sounded again and Odin raised his voice to make another announcement. “For Loki’s eighth opponent, there is the Lady Sif, Sheildmaiden!”

Darcy gasped, “Can we get closer, Sigyn? Please? I want to see this one!” she tugged on the other girl’s arm.

Sigyn took her hand, “Alright. Here, come this way!”

They ran down the stairs, pushing through crowds of people till they came to the lower level, right next to the arena. Darcy noticed the people down here were not as nicely dressed as herself and Sigyn. But mainly, her attention was focused on Loki. He and Sif circled each other, the blonde warrior beaming with rage.

“What do you think of Sif?” Darcy asked Sigyn, eyes trained on her princely friend.

Sigyn drew back her shoulders. “She is not a lady and she prides herself in it. She fights, I believe,
better than most warriors because she works at it. She spends her time in the company of her blade and Thor.”

“Oh.” Darcy said, watching as she lunged towards Loki, who now had his sword out and was using it to counter Sif rather than his magic. Darcy wondered if his magic was all out again. Would he faint in the middle of his duel if he tried to use it? “Why is Loki fighting with a sword?”

Sigyn gestured to the battle, “Sif is a woman. Each round is scored out of ten if the contenders are male. But since Sif is a woman, it will be scored out of twenty, making his score higher if he loses. If all his competitors were male, his score would be out of one hundred. Having a woman fight as well means he will be scored out of one hundred and ten. If he loses terribly to her, he will likely only get half points, which is a winning sum for any other round. He’s willing to risk it, I suppose, in order to conserve his magic.”

“But you just said Sif is a great warrior! Why would it be like that if she’s so good?” Darcy protested, jumping as their blades clashed.

“Because she is a woman.” Sigyn said obviously. Darcy huffed at this, observing the two from a distance. Sif wasn’t bigger than Loki. Well, she wasn’t taller than him, nor did she look anything like him. Yet, Darcy saw something similar in the way they fought.

Sif’s every move was firm, strict, well planned, and deadly. Her blows against Loki’s blade made crashing sounds that had Darcy flinching and jumping, fearing for her friend. Somehow, Loki retaliated with equal finesse. Though, his grace did not come from the swish of his blade like Sigyn had described of Fandral, nor his taunts like Volstagg, or brute force like Hogun.

Each move was a little more deceptive. He never truly lashed out against Sif, only blocked her attacks with his blade. With every passing minute, he would feign offensiveness, then retreat, causing the warrior-girl to falter. It was slow work, but Darcy eventually saw what Loki was doing. Just from watching them, she could tell that Sif was a brilliant fighter. She took note of Loki’s style, calculating his moves. And Loki was taking advantage.

He danced around her, quickly and nimbly until she began to expect his movements. Just when Sif thought she had him cornered on the ground, Loki brought up his sword to hit Sif on the wrist, effectively causing her to drop her blade. The horns sounded and Loki won.

Sigyn and Darcy cheered, “Go Loki! Yeah! Woohoo!”

He looked over at them, a bright smile on his face at the sight of them. He nodded and winked. Darcy thought Sigyn was going to pass out because of all the blood in her face. “You’re blushing.”

“I am not.”

“You are. You loooove him!” Darcy teased, slapping her knees with laughter.

Sif accepted her defeat much better than any of the other warriors had, though Darcy could tell she was angry. She had fallen prey to Loki’s deceptive trick. Darcy felt a bit bad for the girl.

Odin’s voice sounded again through the arena, “And now, for the last match of the day, the Mighty Thor!”

Cheers erupted through the stadium as Thor walked into the arena, twirling his hammer and flashing his winged helm. He saw Darcy and gave her a sparkling smile. Sigyn laughed at Darcy’s answering look of disgust. “Oh, look who has caught the eye of Prince Thor.”
“He’s so mean! And he eats like a pig.”

Sigyn gasped, “You dare speak in such a manner about the Crown Prince of Asgard?”

Darcy drew back a bit, “Uh, maybe?”

Sigyn raised a singular high arched brow and Darcy wondered if everyone on Asgard knew how to do it. She tried to raise hers in retaliation, but both of them lifted. Sigyn tittered, “You are right. He has no regard for niceties.”

The horns blew and instantly, Darcy was drawn into the battle.

Thor, unlike the rest of the warriors, fought with a hammer. Loki had told her about it. She couldn’t exactly remember the name, but she was pretty sure it sounded something like ‘Myeuh Myeuh’. Thor didn’t waste time walking in a circle. Instead he charged at Loki with a supreme lack of poise, hammer raised. Darcy watched as Loki chose not to move, standing still as Thor’s hammer came within centimeters of his face.

Thor stopped, confused by his brother’s immobility. That’s when the entire arena broke into hysterical laughter.

Behind Thor stood another Loki, a dagger in his hand, poised at the back of Thor’s neck. But before the horns could blow, Thor reached behind his head, grabbing his brother’s wrist, yanking him over his shoulder. Loki landed flat on his back, his double dissipating. Thor went to bring down his hammer, but Loki rolled to the side at the last minute, Myeuh Myeuh beating the dirt.

After that, Darcy couldn’t see Loki and Sigyn gasped. “He has managed invisibility?”

“Yeah. Cool right?” Darcy said, intrigued as Thor swung his hammer around, wildly trying to land a hit on his brother.

As Thor swung his hammer to the right, Loki appeared again in front of him, but to the left, and brought his dagger down to Thor’s wrist, applying extra pressure. Darcy thought Thor was going to tumble to the ground as many had done before, but she underestimated his strength. His arm stayed steady and he pushed back against Loki, bringing his hammer forth to attack again.

And once more, Loki dove out of the way, not daring to reciprocate the offense. “LOKI!” he bellowed, “YOUR TRICKS SHALL NOT BEST ME! IT IS I WHO WILL DANCE WITH THE LADY DARCY THIS EVENING!”

The whole arena heard and Darcy let her face fall into her hands in embarrassment. “Oh no. Ew!”

Sigyn had never laughed so hard in her life. “Darcy…Darcy…” she couldn’t finish her tease through the rib cracking hoots that racked her slim body. “…you…should be honored!”

Darcy pressed a hand to her head to try and relieve the burning ache. “Nope. Loki is going to win so that I don’t have to be.”

Sigyn reduced her laughter to a chortle, “Do not worry. He only steps on your toes a little bit. He is not Volstagg.”

That’s when the fight got interesting.

Loki adorned an almost devilish gaze as Thor’s hammer came at him again. He leaned to the side, curving around his brother only to cast another spell. Suddenly, Thor was encased by a circle of
Lokis, all with their swords pointed at him.

Thor stilled for a singular moment, breathing heavily, blue eyes darting around, searching for a way out. All of the Lokis raised their swords in unison, preparing for an attack. Quickly, Thor took Myeuh Myeuh by its leather strap, twirling it in circles, roaring as he surged to strike all of his opponents in one wide arc. Just as soon as they’d appeared, Loki’s multiples vanished, leaving Thor still spinning, his full force in casting out Myeuh Meyuh by the leather strap at the end.

In the next instant, Loki appeared next to Thor, dagger drawn and he sliced the only thing that kept Thor in control of his weapon. His hammer went soaring, flying straight at the balcony Sigyn and Darcy had left not moments ago. The ladies squealed and dove out of the way as Thor’s hammer fell between the mob of them.

The horns blew before Myeuh Myeuh could return to his hand.

The arena burst into applause and Sigyn stared doe eyed at Loki. “He won every battle. Darcy, no one has ever won every battle before.”

Darcy smiled pumping both fists into the air, “Go Loki!”

The Prince approached them with a bashful smile on his face. “Lady Darcy, Lady Sigyn.” He greeted politely.

Sigyn had managed to compose herself and looked somewhat detached again. “Prince Loki, you fought well. It was most impressive.”

He bowed his head in appreciation, “Thank you, Lady Sigyn. I really must thank Lady Darcy. Her council before this ordeal was most encouraging.” His smile opened up to Darcy, “She is truly the best of friends.”

Darcy attempted to wink, but she ended up just blinking really hard. Loki looked at her funny. “I was trying to wink. But I can’t.” He nodded in understanding and Darcy began bouncing with excitement, “Loki! You did it! Now I don’t have to dance with anybody!” she reached across the banister to take him in a breathtaking hug.

Sigyn gasped, “Darcy!”

Loki chuckled, patting her on the back. “Actually, you must dance with me.”

Darcy let go. “What?”

He raised a brow, “According to the terms of the gamble I made with Thor, Lady Darcy.” He reminded teasingly.

Darcy rolled her eyes, “Go and get your title already.”

“And allow me to escort two ladies to the hall while everyone reconvenes.”

Loki was quite pleased with himself, to say the least, and he had never had so much confidence in all his life.

Darcy’s presence on Asgard made his life infinitely better. Her casual teases and friendship made
him feel secure, like he could win any battle. His revelation had him in high spirits. He did not actually need to be a good fighter. He just needed tricks! They would ensure his life in combat.

Sigyn had claimed she could find a different escort if he wished to walk Darcy down, but he insisted.

“Lady Sigyn, it would be an honor.” He had told her, and she smiled at both him and Darcy as they walked down together, laughing and talking about Darcy’s jumpy reactions during certain parts of the fight. Loki could not remember being happier.

They reached the hall and Loki left Darcy and Sigyn on the edge of the crowd. “I’m afraid I must go. But I shall return and you can tell me more of Lady Darcy’s snorting habits.”

Darcy gave him a shove on the arm, sending him towards the center of the room where people were slowly thinning out.

He took a deep breath. This is the moment every Aesir dreamed of. Here he would be granted his title.

The council was situated in a circle before Odin’s throne, all dressed in majestic golden robes. Loki knelt before them, head bowed.

“Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, we have observed your battles and have been both impressed and intimidated. Your weapon of choice is inconsistent, as is your style. You possess little strength of body, but great power of mind and magic. Your deception defeats honest battle, your unpredictable and sporadic advances are unruly, and your cunning aura is none less than devious.”

Loki let a gentle smile touch his lips. He had been around for many people to receive their titles. It was not the meaning of the words that determined the strength of a good title; it was the power they enforced. ‘Cunning’, ‘Deception’, ‘Devious’, ‘Unruly’, and ‘Unpredictable’ practically emanated power.

“You will henceforth be called, Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, Mischief, Lies, and Chaos.”

All of the members raised their hands together as Odin Allfather stepped forwards, holding out his hands to accept the helm that was magicked into it. The spell confused Loki, as he recognized it… it was a moving spell, meant to transport an object from one place to another. Had they already made the helm?

He shook the thought from his mind, lifting his head to accept the symbol of his new title.

He struggled to maintain princely composure at his new attire.

His helm was golden to match his armor, shaped to fit his head and better yet, there were no wings.

In their stead were two deadly curved horns protruding from the front, daring anyone to challenge him. He looked up to his father who gave him a quick smile before returning to his stoic gaze.

All around him, the people of Asgard dropped to their knees before him, paying respects to him and his title. Loki looked to Darcy, the only one in the room besides the Allfather who was not kneeling, as she was too busy whispering reprimands at Fenrir and Jörmungandr who had somehow managed to become covered in a sticky green paste of sorts. He tried not to laugh at his Midgardian friend as Sigyn cleared her throat to remind her new friend of what was happening.

Hastily, Darcy looked around, falling to her knees as well, blinking hard at Loki in what he knew
was an attempted wink.

“Rise all! Let us celebrate today, Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, Mischief, Lies, and Chaos!”

***

The following party was one Loki would never forget.

Darcy was asked to dance by several young men of the court or training warriors. She accepted only a few, letting herself get swept up in their arms. Loki thought she was quite endearing at times, spinning her partner faster than necessary, occasionally knocking her circlet astray. Loki was surprised when Hogun asked her for a dance and he fixed it for her.

However, most of Darcy’s time was dedicated to the food table as she spent a great deal of time trying new desserts.

His mother went to speak with her again and he watched nervously from afar as the Queen of Asgard laughed at an animated story Darcy was telling that he suspected involved Jörmungandr and Fenrir.

He was still watching her when Thor came by to stand at his side. “Brother, I believe…I owe you an apology.”

Loki turned to Thor in shock, “What?”

Thor’s mouth was set, “You are not a good warrior, Loki. You are, in fact, a terrible warrior. But I was wrong in assuming that you are not able in battle.”

Loki decided that this was a compliment and nodded to his brother, “Thank you, Thor.”

He grumbled something under his breath, before bumping Loki with his shoulder. “If you do not ask her to dance, Loki, I will.”

“She will tell you no.” Loki said, only half jesting.

“Ask her so your theories are not proved.” Thor said, clapping Loki on the shoulder and walking away.

Heat crept up Loki’s neck as he began his princely stride towards his friend. Darcy was devouring a rose pastry when he finally got there. She greeted him with a full cheeked smile, swallowing quickly. “Loki! Hi!”

Hesitantly, he swiped a dab of strawberry filling from her cheek. She hardly seemed to notice, setting down her treat. “I love your helmet! It’s beautiful! And kinda scary! I love it! And look!” Darcy exclaimed peering around him, “Sigyn isn’t dancing with anyone! Go ask her! Go!” she gave him a little shove, staring around her feet, “Now, where did Frank and Fenrir go? Oh no, not again!”

Loki, unsurprised by Darcy’s forwardness, decided it would be best to postpone his dance with Darcy and approached Lady Sigyn. “My Lady, would you care to dance?”

Though she was young, Sigyn had the sharp planed face of a noblewoman, delicate yet strong. Her detachment came off as such, “I would be happy to, Prince Loki.”

He offered her his arm, taking her to the middle of the dance floor. Loki was a prince, he had been
educated on dancing, of course. He was not as rambunctious about it as his brother and his friends, but he considered himself decent. One hand rested above her waist while the other grasped her hand. He could tell Sigyn had experience in being led around the floor by clumsy dancers as she kept her feet a good distance from his.

Loki could not help but discern the difference in Sigyn from when they were with Darcy and now. Before she had laughed and small bursts of compassion showed on her face. But now, it was back to how she usually acted around him. Nevertheless, he danced with her, remembering every bit of etiquette his mother had driven into him.

Sigyn relaxed after a few moments, “You are a fine dancer, Prince Loki.”

“The same to you, Lady Sigyn.”

She cleared her throat, “I do not see you dance much. You are usually not at the festivities.”

He quirked a small shy grin. “I don’t much care for parties. I prefer to read. Or practice my magic, I suppose.”

“Does it ever bore you?” she asked airily.

“Magic?” he asked twirling her out and back into his waiting hand.

“Education.” She said, tone becoming more curious as she went on. “You spend all your time learning things. It’s all anyone ever thinks you do; study, learn, doing everything that your brother doesn’t. Don’t you ever just want to…enjoy it? Maybe be a little less…”

Loki’s heart caught in his throat. “What?”

Sigyn hesitated, lifting her chin, “Different.”

The song ended and Loki dropped her hands lightly, bowing as was customary. “No.” he said flatly, lifting her hand to his lips. “I don’t.”

It was a lie. But he was the Prince of Lies now. He strode away from Sigyn, prepared to go back to the library with Darcy and research the tesseract. What did he expect? That just because Darcy came to Asgard everyone’s opinion of him would change? Of course not. He was still Thor’s strange younger brother who was now a chaotic deceiver and a liar.

“Loki!” a voice called to him in a whisper. Distracted from his moping, Loki looked down at Darcy who was standing behind a table full of flowers. She pulled him behind it by his armor. “We have a serious problem!”

“What is it?” Loki asked half heartedly, doubting it would be all that problematic.

Darcy peeped out from behind the flowers, pointing a worried finger at Odin who was sitting in his throne. From a distance, Loki saw a tiny little coil atop his father’s helm and a small fluffy ball of fur covered in sticky green goo, pacing the back of the throne, preparing to jump.

“Oh.” He said faintly, no longer concerned with what Asgard thought of him. He had new, more immediate problems. “Wonderful.”
So, here is that monster chapter I promised. By monster, I mean around ten thousand words. Oops.
Better yet, they aren't done in Asgard till next chapter!

Also, it has been brought to my attention by esmejasper that Darcy's age seems more around 10-11 than 9-10. So, I'm going back and moving around her age a little bit. Darcy is now approaching her eleventh birthday.

As a reference to Norse Mythology, Fenrir is supposedly the mortal enemy of Odin. ;) Per usual, I'm super glad all of you are enjoying this and I promise next chapter is where all the mischief comes in! Feel free to make requests because I take them into account and they give me cool ideas on what to write!

Comment if you like, and if you don't like, don't!
Darcy’s hands went to her hair as Fenrir poised himself to make the bound to Odin’s helm. “Can you teleport them?”

Loki began to panic as well, his fingers wiggling in anticipation of Fenrir’s next move. “No. I don’t think I have quite enough energy yet. I can make them invisible, I think.”

“Do it!” she exclaimed in a whisper, pulling a small pastry from a nearby tray and taking a bite. “These are super good.”

“Darcy, focus!” he said, raising his hands and casting the spell. Both Jörmungandr and Fenrir glowed with gold light for just a moment before the pup leapt onto Odin’s helm. Loki held his breath, waiting for his father to react to the small bump he must have felt. But no such reaction came. The Allfather simply continued his steady gaze around the hall, his one blue eye flicking lazily about.

Loki frowned, “The spell does not prevent my father from sensing their presence. It only shields them from the rest of the party.” He explained.

Darcy nodded, finishing her treat. “Mm, alright. Well, how do we get them down? Can you make it so Odin can’t see them either?”

“No. My magic is drained. Now that I have reached my adolescence, it should manifest quicker over these next few months. But at the moment, I would be lucky to conjure a pebble.”

Darcy tapped her chin, watching as Fenrir positioned his sticky body between the wings and small horns of Odin’s helm. “Well, how do we get him down?”

Loki thought diligently. “Well, we cannot simply go to him, we must…Darcy, he is standing.”

She picked up another dessert. “Where is he going? I can’t see over your horns.”

“He’s leaving the hall! Darcy, anyone outside this room can see them! The Allfather will be disgraced. Or worse, furious.” He told her grimly.

Darcy forced down an especially large bite. “Maybe we just have to get him to bow. Then Fenrir will fall off.”

“I suppose. But, Darcy, he is the King. Why would he bow to anyone?” Loki asked anxiously, trying to come up with a better idea.

She brushed off her skirts, straightening her circlet. “I’m a noblewoman.” She said obviously, “He
has to be polite to a lady.”

Loki watched amazed as Darcy giggled, strutting off to follow the King of Asgard through the grand golden doors of the hall. Dread clawed at Loki’s insides. Would Darcy’s disguise be able to fool the Allfather? What if he imprisoned her for being impolite? What if he struck her down with Gungnir?!

“Darcy, wait!” he protested, marching after her. But his friend was already at the Allfather’s heels, a nervous smile on her face. The king turned around at Loki’s call, Fenrir still sitting, quite proudly, atop his helm.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty.” Darcy said, and Loki saw her shrink in shyness from his father’s one-eyed stare. He knew it well. The scrutiny that one eye could enforce on an individual was unparalleled.

Loki strode over to them, hoping Darcy would remain whole before he got there. “Lady Darcy, there you are. I was afraid I had lost you for a moment…”

He trailed off as Odin looked down at them both knowingly, “I do not know how or why there is a small wolf pup on my head, but might I suggest that we keep him on the ground for now?” a hint of a smile crossed his bearded face and Darcy’s cheeks turned scarlet.

“Yes, Allfather.” Darcy murmured, holding out her hands to receive a sticky, wiggly Fenrir with a grinning Jörmungandr on his head. Both looked entirely too pleased with themselves.

“Yes, Father.” Loki said, cheeks heating as Jörmungandr slithered onto his hand.

Odin gave them another half smile before his kingly composure returned, “Good evening Lady Darcy, Prince Loki. Do not let me keep you from the festivities.”

Darcy waited till Odin had continued down the hall then turned to Loki, “How did he know?”

Loki shook his head, “I do not know.”

Fenrir whined in Darcy’s arms, craning his neck to attempt licking her chin. “Fenrir…bleh! You smell weird! Loki, what is he covered in?”

Loki was shaken from his ideas about the power it might take to elude the Allfather. He must research that at some point. He quizzically ran a finger over Fenrir’s fur, collecting a bit of the substance in his fingers. It was gooey and stuck his fingers together so tightly, he had to work to separate them. “It is sap from Northern Asgardian Pines.” He said, sniffing it. “It’s used in the palace for cosmetic purposes. The Ladies use it as a balm on their skin and rinse it off after a few minutes. I believe it is soluble in oil.”

“Great! Where do we get oil? Like, cooking oil? Or body oil? Or olive oil?” Darcy asked, relenting and letting Fenrir lick the strawberry filling off her face.

“I’m not sure. I think there should be some in the ladies bathing chambers.” He thought, pondering where exactly ladies would keep their oils.

“Okay! Let’s go! Lead the way!” Darcy cried, holding the puppy away from her dress so the sap wouldn’t damage the silk.

Loki paled, “Darcy, I cannot go into the ladies’ bathing chambers!” he exclaimed, “It would be most disrespectful!”
She groaned, “Then what do we do?”

***

Darcy gasped when she saw what Loki called ‘bathing chambers’.

The whole room was huge, the walls shining with intricate golden vines and floating balls of luminescent light. The main area was a giant pool, filled with rippling steaming water that smelled so sweet, Darcy considered drinking it. In the corner, gently stirring the water was a waterfall, spilling clean water into the pool.

“Cool.” Darcy said, heading for another archway. Loki had told her to search for a round green bottle that matched the color of the sap. But he had never been in the ladies’ bathing chamber, so Darcy had to find it herself.

In the next room were the fanciest set of toilets Darcy had ever seen. Well, at least she thought they were toilets. She couldn’t be quite sure.

She passed through several more plush looking rooms with sofas and chaise longues, set next to tables piled high with little glass bottles each with a different smell. She thought about the possibility of them being oil, but upon inspection she found they were only perfumes. She sneezed as they entered the next room, coughing a bit in the stuffy air. She cleared her throat to breathe easier.

Darcy finally felt like she hit the jackpot. All around her were mirrors, high backed chairs, and counters packed thick with vials of every shape, style, and color. Tubes of paste and jars of salts lay at small half filled basins full of rich liquids and gasses Darcy had never seen. “My mom would love this, Fenrir. She always says that she looks dead without her make-up. Daddy says she looks beautiful all the time. But that’s because he loooves her.”

Darcy began searching through the bottles, but there were just so many! There were blue bottles, and metal bottles, and gold bottles, tall bottles, skinny bottles, fat bottles, small bottles, and any other kind of bottle in between.

After five long hard minutes of looking, Darcy collapsed into a chair. “I’m never wearing make-up. This is too much work.” She sighed, letting her toes dip into the basin at her feet.

Suddenly, across the room, a little purple bottle caught her eye. It was pretty, round, and her favorite color. Distracted, Darcy bounded over to it, climbing onto the counter to reach the shelf it sat on. She lifted the cap to peer inside. It seemed to be a watery liquid, with a slightly milky color. Carefully, she sniffed it, her senses falling apart.

It smelled good enough to eat.

She was about to stick her finger in it when the tip of a blade pressed between her shoulders. “What are you doing here, wench? And what is that beast?”

Terrified, Darcy spun around, the purple bottle flying from her hand, and landing smack across her attacker’s blonde head.

An angry growl came from the girl with the sword as the substance seeped over her hair, steaming as it reached her scalp. She screamed and Darcy held out her hands to help, “Holy Fruit Loops!”

Fenrir yelped, scurrying out of the way as the girl fell to her knees. Darcy noticed she was wearing leather pants and armor rather than a dress like most ladies. “Sif?”
Darcy could tell she was trying not to yell again as a blonde chunk of hair fell from her head. “Uh oh.”


Darcy chuckled nervously, backing against the counter as Sif slowly rose to her feet, looking absolutely livid. Her face was scorching with fury and her body shook, strands of silky blonde hair falling out as she pointed her blade at Darcy’s neck. Sif’s gaze caught her reflection in the mirror behind them, eyes narrowing with rage. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? You insolent—“

Just as Darcy thought she was going to get shish-kabobed, Sif’s eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the ground, unconscious. As her body fell, Darcy saw in the golden archway her favorite horned prince. “Loki! I thought you weren’t allowed in here!”

He grimaced, shifting himself uncomfortably. “I am not. But I heard screaming. What did you do to berate Sif?”

“I don’t know! I was just looking through bottles and stuff, then BAM! She’s poking me with a sword and calling me a wench.” Darcy explained, bending over Sif’s body, frowning as her hair continued to fall out. “Oh, and then I accidently dropped this on her head. Is there another thing that grows hair back?”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up into his helmet. “Darcy…you dropped hair-removing acid onto her head?”

“I guess. I dunno. She scared me.”

He shook his head, “Darcy there is no material in here that will grow her hair back! She will have to have a sorcerer do it! And there are few who would take such a small job as growing hair back!”

Darcy’s hands went to her hair, knocking her circlet astray. “What do we do? Can you grow it back? Is she dead? Did I kill her? Oh my god! I killed her! I’m going to go to jail forever!”

Loki shook his head, “Darcy, calm down! Sif isn’t dead! I simply put her to sleep. My magic has come back, perhaps a bit stronger this time. I’m not sure. I have never tried to grow anyone’s hair back before.”

“C’mon Loki! Look! She’s bald!” Darcy panicked. “She’s going to kill me when she wakes up. She was going to kill me anyways. Why was she going to kill me?”

Loki racked his brain for words that would allow for him to re-grow her hair. “I do not know. You are a noblewoman’s daughter. It wouldn’t be unreasonable for you to be in here.”

Darcy poked around the shieldmaiden’s body, finding a small little vial and holding it up. “What is this?”

Loki received it, opening the top. “It is eye make-up.” He said, surprised at his own words. “Darcy, I believe the Lady Sif was simply embarrassed.”

Darcy looked confused. “Why? What did I do?”

Loki pressed his lips together, brushing the loose hair from her face and sure enough there was careful make up on her eyelids. “Nothing. Sif is just a very focused shieldmaiden. She fights every day to be the emblem of a good warrior rather than a lady. She would not be caught dead using make-up. You came in and could have seen, I suppose.”
Darcy frowned, “Why? It’s not like anyone is going to think she’s not a warrior because she uses make-up, right?”

“I do not know. They might. I fight with a sword as well as magic and I am scorned for beingowanly. There is no doubt they would do the same for Sif.” He whispered and Darcy could tell he empathized with her.

“That isn’t fair.” She said, leaning on her palms as they crouched next to Sif.

Loki held up his hands, “I think I have the spell. But it may not work…”

“Try it.” Darcy urged as Sif began to stir.

Steadily, Loki brushed his fingertips over Sif’s head and Darcy gawked as hair began shooting out from her scalp. Long, silky strands of black hair grew down to her shoulders.

“Oh no.” Loki said, “She’s going to kill me.”

Darcy shrugged, “Why? She’s not bald anymore. I kinda think it looks cool black.”

Loki shook his head, “Darcy, black hair is not desirable on Asgard. Especially for a lady.”

“Can’t you just change it? You have black hair, so it can’t be too bad.” She said, petting one of the darkened locks.

He waved his hand over Sif’s hair, green light washing over her head. Nothing changed. Loki shook his hornshead, “The magic is irreparable by my hand. Perhaps a more advanced sorcerer than I could—“

He was cut off by Sif’s blade flying up in the next instant. Loki dove out of the way, the now dark haired girl looming over him. “You beat me and see further reason to temper my misery with your magic?! You—“ her glare flicked to the mirror and her face morphed into the epitome of shock before retreating to a furious glower. “You turned my hair BLACK!? Why you—“

She raised her fists to attack, her sword lay forgotten between them. Loki stood, prepared to defend himself when a thin cloud of glittering gas surrounded Sif’s head and she fell, once again, to the ground. Darcy stood behind her holding a smoking silver bottle, a pleased little grin on her lips.

“Coooool.”

“Darcy, what did you do?!” Loki asked, bending down to make sure Sif had not died.

“I put her to sleep!”

“With what?”

Darcy put a cap on the bottle, examining its outside. “Well, it doesn’t have a label. I’m guessing it’s just sleeping gas.”

Loki gingerly took the bottle from Darcy, fearing as to what it may be. Ever so carefully, he sniffed the container, weighing it in his hands. He sighed with relief, “It is only a simple sleeping brew. It is prescribed to those who suffer insomnia.”

Darcy lifted it, “Do they have anything like it on Midgard?”

He stood, brushing powder from the ladies’ cosmetics counter from his trousers and thinking about his biology and chemistry books. “I believe they have a few things similar to this. They come in the
forms of your…medications? Drugs?” He trailed off thoughtfully. Midgardians were so in depth on everything they learned. How could this potion, concocted originally by magic, possibly be so complex as Midgardian chemicals they had gone through every molecular tunnel to find?

“Uh…wait..I don’t get it. What kinds? What do they do? How do they work?” Darcy asked curiously.

“I shall explain it to you later.” He said, searching for the oil Darcy had originally come in for. He found a large bulbous jar of it on the floor next to a basin. As he bent down to get it, a thought occurred to him, “Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“How did you know that gas would put Sif to sleep?” Loki questioned, turning to see Darcy cradling two sleeping animals in her arms.

“Frank sniffed it first. Then Fenrir.” She grunted and coughed a couple times, failing to remove her stuck hand from Fenrir’s sappy back. “I wonder how he got into this anyhow.”

Loki was about to answer when a woman’s voice echoed through the chamber, “Who’s there?!”

They looked at each other in panic, Loki pushing Darcy forwards in earnest, the small dog still stuck to her hands. “Run!”

Leaving Sif’s unconscious black haired body behind, they sprinted through the rooms once more, dodging footstools and scattered bottles of perfumes and discarded hair combs. The smack of flat women’s shoes against marble floors followed them through their scurried trek. Darcy’s heart was pounding by the time they made it back to the bathing area.

Loki was surprised by his friend’s lack of endurance. Perhaps it was because she was Midgardian. “Come Darcy, we just need to return to my chambers so we can clean Fenrir.” He whispered hurriedly, tugging on her arm.

Collecting herself, Darcy nodded, short legs taking two steps to match one of Loki’s strides. He thought fast, pulling them down a separate hallway that diverged from the obvious escape route. They only needed to scale a staircase or three before they reached his room. Still cradling the bottle of oil, Loki made his way up the steps, occasionally casting a glance back at Darcy who was keeping pace while making sounds of exertion. He did not know what the stamina of a young Midgardian girl should be, but if she kept making those wheezing sounds, he would take her to a healer.

At long last, they made it to his room and he opened the tall golden door, allowing Darcy to walk in before him. She stumbled inside, her sticky green hand clutching her chest, other handprints coating the silky fabric of her dress. Jörmungandr lay across Fenrir’s head, his scales plastered with sap.

“Darcy, here, bring them into the washroom. I shall…Darcy?” he glanced over at his friend, only to find her lying on the ground, that obscene wheezing noise louder than ever. “Darcy!”

“Loki…I…have….I…” she struggled to get out the words as he sunk to his knees by her head.

“Darcy, hush! You will only make it worse! Is this what happens to Midgardians when they run?” he asked, feeling her head for any sign of fever.

She shook her head vigorously, “No…I…I…have,” she wheezed some more, a few painful coughs
coming out with it, “Asthma…”

Loki shook his head, “What? Is this a disease? Why did you not tell me you were ill, Darcy! I could have fixed it!”

“No…it’s…no…need…inhaler!” she choked out.

Loki racked his brain. He had never heard of this ‘asthma’ on Asgard. Taking her to the healers would mean they would know she was Midgardian. It was a last resort. Loki thought quickly. What did he know of Midgardian anatomy? It was not all that different from Asgardian, only their bodies were weaker and susceptible to such things as asthma.

He thought to his book on physical diagnosis and examination. All he really needed to do was analyze the situation at hand. Darcy had been clutching her neck, so there must be a problem with her air passages. The wheezing would suggest she has limited breathing. There’s nothing that could have been lodged in her neck at this point, so something from the inside must have done that.

Swelling?

Was it swelling? Why did Loki not understand?

He smacked his head, hands trembling over his friend. “Darcy! What is asthma??”

She wheezed out the next words, her breathing labored. Loki’s heart beat fast. Was he not supposed to have at least sixty more years with his friend? Was she truly going to die now? He was the one who brought her to Asgard! Would he be a murderer? “My…my chest…throat…”

“Chest…your lungs? What is wrong with them? Darcy, I cannot….” A thought occurred to him. Another that had to do with chemicals. Wasn’t there something in the chemistry book about…

Perhaps it was too risky…

“Loki…I need…” Darcy coughed and Loki pet her head.

“Shh, do not speak Darcy. I will fix it. Do not speak.” He repeated, trying to keep the increasing dread from his voice. Should he tell his mother? She would have his head for sure….

Darcy coughed again, her small body quaking with every painful churn. Her hand twitched to brush his knee and he noticed her fingernails were turning blue from lack of oxygen.

He made a decision.

Ever so cautiously, he cast a healing spell over Darcy’s mouth, the bright wisps of gold magic flowing down her throat. He prayed to the gods that she did not die. He could not be a murderer. Men killed in wars, but they did not kill their friends. He would not kill his friend. Come to think of it, he did not really want to kill anything. Especially not Darcy. Oh gods help him.

He waited by Darcy’s side, clutching her sappy hand until the terrifying wheezing eased away and her fingers turned pink once again. “Loki?”

“I am here. Darcy, I am so sorry. I did not know Midgardians could not endure such vigorous activity.” Loki babbled, helping her to sit up. “From now on we will walk.”

She shook her head, “I can run. I made it the whole half mile in gym! I just have asthma. I’m allergic to dust and pollen, but mostly just dust. It makes me breathe funny if I run when there’s
“Dust.” She explained, rubbing her eyes. “Did you use my inhaler? I didn’t think I brought it with me. Or did you use magic? I thought you were bad at healing things? Or aren’t you? Am I dead? I don’t feel dead. Did we get caught?”

“No.” Loki sighed, relieved that Darcy was not dead and was alive enough to ask questions. “All this was from…dust?”

Darcy shrugged, “Yeah. I guess. I don’t really know how it works.”

She stood up, unsteadily walking around the room, Fenrir in her hands. “Can we read your books when I don’t have sap on me? Then you can explain what you were talking about earlier with the sleeping potion.”

Loki came back to his senses, standing up and taking the bottle of oil in his hands. “Of course. Darcy, are you well enough?”

“I’m fine! You did healing magic stuff! Now c’mon, Fenrir is drooling on me.”

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After Loki had oiled Jörmungandr, Darcy and Fenrir, all of them smelling strongly of Asgardian pine, Darcy explored his room. He found it amusing how she compared it to hers.

The first section of his room was his study. Bookshelves full of his favorite books throughout the years lined the walls. A fireplace on the back wall was framed by two large green curtained windows. His desk faced the mantle, set a ways back so two plush chairs, a chaise longue and a sofa could adjourn around the fireplace. Loki figured them more of decorations than anything. He felt they were silly. Guests did not frequent his room, or anyone else’s.

Darcy seemed most impressed with his books and she joyously picked up different ones in several different languages, reading the covers aloud. She asked if she could borrow one titled, ‘A Guide to the Asgardian Government’.

“That one is almost completely satire. It is hardly partial to anything. It’s funny, but informative.” He commented, tapping the brown leather cover.

“I want to try it.” Darcy said, opening it to the first page.

He agreed and she went about seeing the rest of his chambers. She was awed by the bathroom and asked how the toilet worked. Loki did not actually know how the toilet worked and he wrote a reminder in his journal to find an answer to Darcy’s question.

When they got to his bed chamber, Darcy squealed with joy, running up to his bed and throwing herself onto it. “Loki! Your bed!”

“It is my bed. Why?” he asked from the archway as Darcy stood on the covers bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Loki! Your bed is amazing!” she laughed, falling back into his pillows. “Jump with me!”

“Why would I jump on my bed?” Loki asked, glancing around. He was a prince and princes did not jump on beds.

She giggled. “Oh c’mon, Loki. I jump on my bed all the time! I triple doggie dare you to jump on the bed!”
He pressed his lips together contemplatively. Should he jump on the bed? Well, if no one was here to see him but Darcy…

Grinning he removed his helm, setting it on a table before running straight at his bed. Darcy giggled as he jumped higher, bouncing around the cushions and making her fall over in his gusto. “There.” He said happily, letting himself flop gracelessly into the pillows next to his friend. “Is that sufficient jumping, Lady Darcy?”

She laughed, flinging herself from the bed to approach the glass doors that led out to his balcony. “Can we go out on it?”

“Of course.” He smiled, opening the doors to a near perfect view of the city and the bifrost in the distance.

Darcy came up behind him, leaning her forearms on the banister. “Wow. That’s pretty.”

“Asgard?” Loki asked standing next to her, arms at his sides and gaze on the horizon.

“Space.” Darcy corrected, slouching so her cheek rested in her hand. “Is that Yggdrasil?”

“Yes.” He said, noticing the day had dimmed and the waters surrounding the palace. “It is quite magnificent.”

“I wish I had my glasses. Then I could see it for real.” She sighed, glancing around. “Wait! What time is it?! Loki, I have to go home! My mom is going to freak out if I’m not at home!”

Loki tore himself from his musings about healing spells. He would need to go visit Eir to learn more. Books could only teach so much and healing was a profession taught almost solely in person. It was a trade rather than a practice. He would need it if he was going to look after Darcy. Midgardian healers…no, doctors…must truly be terrible if they only lived seventy years.

“Of course. We must be cautious though. I will take you back on Hel. The palace should not be especially full because of the party.” He told her, straightening her circlet.

“Won’t everyone be confused? It’s your birthday party and you’re not even going to be there.” Darcy queried.

Loki shook his head, cheeks reddening as he remembered his conversation with Sigyn. “I do not usually attend Asgardian festivities.”

“Why?” Darcy asked, standing on her toes to put his helmet on his head.

He swallowed thickly. Would now really be the time to tell Darcy of his off-putting demeanor? She had similar problems, did she not? “I do not feel…well…comfortable, I suppose. I have never been thought of as…well, as important as my brother or others my age. Occasionally I feel as though I do not truly belong on Asgard.” He admitted.

Darcy smirked, her blue eyes looking up at him in disbelief. “Loki, you’re you! You’re the most important person I know! And my Dad says that you can belong anywhere you want to. I told him I didn’t belong at my ballet class last year because all the girls were really quiet and that’s what he told me. But I don’t really like ballet, so I quit.”

Loki’s lips twitched into a small smile. “Thank you, Darcy. You are the most important person I know as well.”
“Really?!” she asked, mouth breaking into a toothy grin when he nodded. The following force of her hug almost threw him to the ground. “I’ve always wanted to be really important to somebody! Well, there’s my mom and dad, but they’re not my friends, they’re my parents, so they only count a little bit. Okay, they count a lot, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes.” Loki assured, returning Darcy’s embrace, “I know what you mean.”

In the next second, she broke away, determination on her proud face, “We have to go! Come on! I think Fenrir and Frank are still asleep!” she cried, darting through his rooms to retrieve their pets.

“Darcy, do not run!” Loki called after her, already worried again for his friend.

***

Loki had been right about the palace being empty.

Whomever had almost found them in the ladies’ chambers was gone and everyone seemed to be enjoying the party, save for the guards who remained dutifully at their posts. Loki used his and Thor’s old routes to weave around them.

The ride back to the cave was peaceful. The mountain tops were visible, shining brightly and reflecting the colorful darkening sky above them. Darcy prattled on about how her school should be more like Asgard, her arms tightening around his middle when Hel leapt over different blockages that impeded their path.

“Loki?” Darcy asked as they approached the mountain side that held the portal back to Midgard.

“Yes?” he asked, pulling on Hel’s reins so she slowed to a trot.

“Can we go visit other realms?”

Loki smiled sadly. “I wish we could Darcy. But the only way between realms is the bifrost. And I don’t suppose Heimdall would be keen on letting us go wherever. He has sworn loyalty to the Allfather.”

Darcy loosened her grip, sitting up a little straighter to see the mountain. “But that cave isn’t the bifrost.”

He almost fell off Hel with the overwhelming truth and implications of her statement. “Darcy, have I ever told you that you are, in fact, a genius?”

“No. But awesome! Why am I a genius?”

His mind was skating with possibilities as they reached the portal. He slid off Hel, taking sleeping Fenrir and Jörmungandr with him. He offered Darcy his hand. She accepted it, hopping down as well. She turned to Hel, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “Darcy, there is this portal that goes to Midgard. Who knows the potential other passages exist? I wonder if anyone has ever bothered to search for them.”

“Can we look for them, Loki? Please oh please oh pleaseeeeeease?” she pleaded, messy curls splaying out around her excited face.

“Of course! I will do research and perhaps study Asgardian geography. I can get you something as well. A proper map?” he suggested, leading the way to the cave.
Darcy practically jumped with excitement, “Right! And there aren’t trains on Asgard! Only griffins
and bilgesnipe and infinite serpents and stuff!”
“Well…I wouldn’t say ‘only’…However, I do have more experience with those things than trains.”
He said, holding her hand as the cave worked to bring them back to Midgard.
Darcy shuffled out from under her bed, “This is going to be great!” she shuffled around her room,
putting her borrowed book in her bedside table, “And what do I do about this outfit?”
Loki sat on her bed, casting a spell to change Darcy’s dress into her purple pajamas. The only thing
that remained from her noblewoman getup was the purple ribbon. She untied it from her hair,
smoothing it out over her desk. Loki set a sleeping Fenrir on the foot of her bed where he usually
slept and plucked Jörmungandr from his back, stowing his friend in his pocket. “I agree. This will
be quite the expedition. Perhaps while on other realms, we can find the tesseract.”
Darcy nodded enthusiastically, walking to her bookshelf and pulling out several yellowing ‘chapter
books’ she claimed were not very good. From behind them she tugged a colorful bag of sorts. “We
can! You can bring maps and stuff. I don’t know if I can go back to Asgard. It was fun and I want
to see Sigyn again, but…holy cow! It’s ten o’ clock! My parents won’t ever let me stay gone that
long! I wonder where they are. Probably in bed. Anyways, here’s your birthday present!”
She plopped down next to him, holding out the bright green bag with little drawn depictions of
frogs on them. The thin tissue inside was white and a thick piece of folded green paper. He took
that out first since it seemed most peculiar.
Upon unfolding it, he found it was a note from Darcy. He looked to her skeptically but she gestured
excitedly for him to read it.

Loki,
I got you this because I know you like to take apart my stuff and put it back together again. Then I
got you the other thing because I know you like to write down a lot of stuff and your journal is
reeeeelly full!
Happy Birthday
Love Darcy
xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo

It was signed with a little purple heart next to her name.
“The x’s are kisses and the o’s are hugs.” She informed him. “Now open the present! Open it!” she
exclaimed, hardly giving him time to appreciate her note.
“Alright! I’m opening it.” He declared, taking the wrapped items from the bag.
The first was a set of strange metal tools with rubber ends. The metal on some was flattened at the
end, while the tips of others were pointed with indentations.
“Those are screwdrivers. You always take apart stuff with your fingernails; I thought that you’d


like these ones. You can open stuff easier and make things. I don’t think anything on Asgard has
screws, but you still need to open things.” She explained, getting closer and closer to him as she
spoke. “I got them from the cupboard downstairs. My mom used to use them to put batteries in my
/toys, but I don’t play with a lot of battery toys anymore.”

“I love them, Darcy! It was a most thoughtful gift.” He said, a grin taking over his face. “I shall use
them regularly, I’m sure.”

“Yes! Now the next one.” She urged, kicking her legs animatedly off the edge of her bed.

Loki took out the next parcel, turning it over in his hand. It was a book, leather like his, but dyed
green and with straps holding it shut. “Darcy…it is wonderful.” He said, opening the cover and
running his fingers over the lined pages. How different…but also very useful.

“I knew you’d love it!” she said, standing on the bed, “I told my mom I needed it to write stuff in
when we were at the bookstore and she bought it for me because Darius wanted a brownie from
the café and if Darius had a brownie then I got to have something too. But I didn’t want a brownie,
I wanted a birthday present for you. I was going to get you a physics book but my mom didn’t want
me to get that because she said I wouldn’t understand it!”

She fell back down on her pillows, sighing. “What do you think you’re gonna write in it?”

Loki grinned, untying the elaborate knots that held the book shut. “Everything. This will be the
book of our search. We will take notes of what we learn in here.”

Darcy yawned, “We should go tomorrow. It’ll be fun...” she sighed, curling up to Fenrir.

Loki pulled up the covers around them, sitting cross legged next to her. “We may have to do some
exploring first.”

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Frigga stood on the bifrost, gazing over Yggdrasil, Heimdall at her side.

“Have they returned to Midgard safely?” she asked kindly, her focus unyielding from the stars
before her.

Heimdall chuckled, “Yes. They are safe…” he tone turned serious, “Though I doubt our prince will
ever let harm come to her. Nor she to him for that matter.”

The Queen of Asgard smiled knowingly. On occasion when she caught a glimpse into the future
through her scrying pool. It would only give her a vague idea of what could possibly happen. Some
days she may see a flash of a face, or the entirety of a conversation. Some days she may only get
whispered words and distant ideas. Yet out of all of those uncertainties, of this she was sure: “They
will always be there for each other.”

Chapter End Notes

So, surprise surprise!
Frigga knows, of course. I’ve been planning it for a while now and here, chapter 8, it is
happening.
Also, I have made a decision.  
I will absolutely be sticking to canon! There will be all the canon sticking with many influences from my head. I can guarantee, it will be amazing.  
I was sitting around, trying to finalize the plot and it hit me like:

You may have also noticed in this fic that Odin is not an asshole. I know, it's a huge contrast from my last fic where Odin was THE asshole. However, I intend to make him not entirely an asshat. So, we'll see how it goes.

I still love requests if there are any of those out there.  
Thank you everyone for comments, kudos, and bookmarks. Really, I get the fluffy feels for you guys. Comment if you like, and if you don't like, don't.  
Q
“I’m going to kill him.” Sif growled, nudging Thor with the end of her blade, urging him to stand back up. They had been sparring for hours now and Thor was becoming increasingly less enthusiastic about losing against Sif’s wrathful sword. “Again.”

Thor grunted, calling his hammer. “Sif, I really do not see what the problem is. It’s just hair.”

“No…” Sif snarled, lashing out at him, “It was my hair. Thor, my hair is black! No one can change it back either. It’s stuck like this!” her shield bashed against Mjolnir.

“Sif…” Thor panted, deflecting her next blow and dropping his hammer. “Why should it matter?”

She kept her blade in the air, “What are you talking about?”

Thor pushed her sword away to grasp his friend’s shoulders, “You say it almost every day Sif. You are a warrior. Your power comes from the force of your blade, not the color of your hair! Killing Loki won’t fix that. And it will make my mother hate you forever.”

Finally, she relented, letting down her sword and slumping down in the grass. “I do not know if it is wise to say, ‘you are right’….”

Thor sat down as well, laughing. “I am right!” he bumped her shoulder with his. “Perhaps all of those aspiring suitors will stop asking you for dances.”

She chuckled as well, running a hand through her black locks. “Now there is a good side to this curse.” She sighed, “I suppose it would be rather useless to kill Loki. I mean, I would have to find him first, wouldn’t I?”

“Is he not in the library? You go there occasionally.” Thor commented, knowing Sif liked to go study books on blocking techniques.

“Some days he is there, speaking with his snake and practicing magic. Other times he is simply gone.”

They sat in silence for a while, letting the breeze cool their sweaty faces.

Sif spoke up. “Does it bother you?”

“Does what bother me?” Thor asked, tearing grass from the ground.

“Loki’s…I don’t know…his knowledge.” Sif said vaguely, letting light reflect off her blade.

Thor scoffed. “Loki’s knowledge?”
“You know what I mean.” Sif shot back. “He is different, and effeminate at times, but you would be lying to say that he was not clever.”

He sighed, “Why would this bother me? It’s his life.”

“Yes. But you are both Princes of Asgard. He was given a powerful title, Thor, and for good reason. Aren’t you the least bit worried that…”

Thor stood in a flash, Mjolnir in hand. “Worried that what? He’ll take the throne?”

Sif glowered, getting to her feet as well. “Yes! He scored higher than you at his ceremony! He has the favor of half the court, which you would know if you bothered paying attention during those council meetings you both sit through! Not to mention, he does not have such a reckless reputation!”

Thor scowled, “What are you suggesting? That I act more like Loki? Should I begin practicing magic now or later?”

“Don’t be so thick.” She retorted hotly. “You may be the eldest, but that alone cannot make you king and you know it. If your father sees Loki is better suited than you, he will make him king.”

Thor’s eyes flashed, “Yes. I am aware. But, dear Sif, I do not think you realize how difficult it is to make an impression when you cannot leave the palace grounds.”

She jabbed him in the chest with the pummel of her sword. “So, get permission. Loki spends his time out and about doing whatever he does. Odin knows, it probably isn’t doing anything to benefit Asgard. Do something for the good of the kingdom.”

Thor looked to her incredulously, blinking a few times. “How long have you been thinking about that?”

“Since you almost killed your brother with a bilgesnipe.”

“Ah.” He scratched the back of his neck, “I do not know if it is wise to say ‘you are right’….”

“Nonsense.” Sif smirked, raising her sword in an open challenge, “I am always right.”

***

Darcy groaned, throwing her backpack on the floor and kicking off her cleats. “I’m so bad at soccer.”

Loki looked up from his book he’d been reading, waiting for Darcy to get home. “You’ve said so before.”

She stumbled over to her bed, collapsing on the covers, her face next to Loki’s knee.

It had been a few months since Darcy’s trip to Asgard and things had been moving at an antagonizing slow pace. Darcy’s parents had become rather strict about the amount of time she was allowed to spend in her room and had signed her up for her school soccer team as well as therapy on Thursdays.

Darcy despised both. She said her therapist was always asking her ridiculous questions about her life at home and school. She told him about the mystical stories she told her therapist. Some included both magic toilets and flying snakes, while others only spoke of mind-controlling candy.
Apparently, word of her tall tales had reached her parents and they made sure Darcy would be going to therapy for another year.

Along with this, Darcy also held a deep seated abhorrence for ‘soccer’. She would come home from practice on school-day afternoons with dirty knees and exhaustion seeping from her being. Loki hated to see his friend in such misery and tried his best to make her feel better with their search for the tesseract.

It pleased him that all of her irritation dissipated when they worked together. He brought her various reading materials and maps for them to study. They took notes in his journal, exploring every realm from Nilfheim to Asgard in their readings. Darcy had grown a little in the last couple of months. She remained short, but with an added few inches and her face looked a little less childish and more adolescent.

Yet, her enthusiasm never left. No matter how upset she was when she got home, it never lasted longer than five minutes.

Fenrir and Jörmungandr had grown as well. Fenrir was more doggish, standing tall and guarding Darcy’s bed every night. However, he still seemed to think he was no bigger than the day they found him. Jörmungandr had also grown. He could no longer stay in Loki’s pocket or sit on Fenrir’s head. Rather, he draped himself across Loki’s shoulders or wrapped himself around Darcy’s arm.

The older their pets got, Loki noticed strange habits from the both of them. Occasionally, Fenrir would move around on his belly, swaying back and forth in an attempt to move like a snake. Jörmungandr would sometimes lay on the floor and follow his tail around in circles until he caught it in his mouth. Even then, he would continue his circular motion.

Usually he only did this when Loki was feeling especially tense about something. He attempted to research if Infinite Serpents could be stressed, but no information was available. Apparently, most people died upon encounter with Infinite Serpents, so there was limited knowledge on them.

Loki deduced that Jörmungandr could indeed feel stressed, for every time Thor came near he would either stare maliciously at him or retreat into his ouroboros state.

Darcy sighed, sitting up, a smile spreading across her face. “Guess what?”

“What?” he asked, ready for any news that would break Darcy’s pouting a full minute early.

“I said ‘guess’!” She insisted sitting up and shedding her shin guards and socks along with her light green jersey to reveal a purple tank top.

He grinned back, remembering the date they had been counting down for since October. “It is your winter holiday.”

She leapt up, pumping her fist in the air. “Yes! I’ve already got my bag ready and I’m borrowing this rope from my Dad but he doesn’t know it yet. This is going to be great! C’mon, let’s review what we know.”

Loki promptly took out his journal, flipping through the pages till he came to what he needed. “Magical anomaly build ups usually form—”

“--between places where, during the convergence, all nine realms open to each other. Which means ——”
“—that most of these irregularities are set in mountainous regions because of the pressure created by shifting land mass—“

“—which ultimately creates inconsistent magical energy that links realms together. It makes—“

“—a portal. But sometimes—“

“—transportation between—“

“—certain realms—“

“—can only be activated—“

“—by heat or friction—“

“—and of course there are specific times because—“

“—the gravitational force of Asgard’s four moons—“

“can offset the balance of potential motion in the stones of the mountain’s higher altitudes.” They finished together.

Darcy tapped her chin, pushing on her glasses. “I still don’t get the convergence thing. I mean, why does it make these little weak spots in the realms?”

Loki turned a new page in his journal, “Well, think about it like this, the division of the nine realms is separated, not by dimension, but rather space and time. During the convergence, both of those are taken away. The portals between worlds are found and detectable because time, where it is very constant in specific realms, is dependent on space. And space is inconstant and can be broken at nearly every turn except for time.”

Darcy sat on the ground, deep in thought. “You mean like teleporting? It takes time to move through space. But the convergence…”

“The convergence is when space cancels out and the time, since it is reliant on space, is decreased between realms. And like any problem, we cannot simply create the variable of these links. They are already there.”

He drew out an equation, using his knowledge from the math book Darcy had found near the High School building when she was walking around the track at soccer practice. He rather liked this calculus. If Asgard thought this in depth about their sciences, they would be so much farther ahead than they are now. He already had so many ideas that could improve Asgardian life.

He even had ideas about changes to the bifrost…

Darcy crawled up on the bed, Jörmungandr slithering across her back as she leaned over Loki’s shoulder. She read the equation slowly, her fingers tapping out the math on his shoulder. “Oh. I get it. It’s like a coat and the portals are like the button holes.”

“Exactly.” Loki said, snapping his journal shut. He had become so accustomed to Darcy’s easy understanding that it was almost difficult to be back on Asgard with people who barely even touched on magical properties, let alone the Midgardian implications.

Now that he had his title, he was being introduced more strongly to his duties as a prince. He no longer spent every waking hour in his room or the library. There were meetings that he and Thor
attended, public announcements, foreign affairs strategy meetings, domestic affairs meetings, formal dinners, and countless other time-consuming necessities.

Loki paid as much attention as he could, but on the days where it was debate after debate on the same topic for hours, his mind would wander to Darcy’s room; him sitting on her bed with a book, discussing the mysteries of the universe while the curiosity in her blue eyes burned brightly.

Still, he managed his time wisely. He still practiced magic in the library and trained in the fields with Thor. He was even able to start lessons with Eir who was more than happy to assist him in learning about healing. She was impressed by how quickly he mastered it and she told his mother how, in all her years, she had never seen someone catch on as quickly as Loki.

But he was not without motivation. If he was going on dangerous adventures with Darcy, he wanted to be sure she would not die while they explored.

And occasionally, in those few quiet hours in the library or contemplative walks in the gardens, he would see Sigyn. They didn’t talk like they had on his birthday, and he did not know quite what to think of her.

She had openly told him he should behave more like everyone else, yet she still seemed to desire conversation with him. No matter how brief. Perhaps what she had said was in his best interest. It is possible.

He spoke to Darcy about it and she told him that Sigyn most likely meant no harm. So, when she passed him in the library or in the halls, he would greet her and they would speak shortly. But it happened rarely. He found that even as he and Darcy had grown, Sigyn had as well.

Loki had always appreciated the comparison of women to flowers. He felt that different women were different breeds and shapes and ages. Take Sigyn, for example: she was beautiful, budding, and her touch pricked like a thorn. She was a rose, and he romanticized her as such.

His mother was more like a peony, layered with so many lovely petals that you never quite knew what was at the center.

But Darcy was not a flower. He couldn’t think of any that could totally embody his friend. She was amusing and witty and curious and nothing that could be described simply by a plant.

Darcy had started picking out fresh clothes and pulled a backpack from her closet. “I think I should go take a shower. I smell like grass and Rachel Durry’s armpit.”

Loki sniffed her jersey experimentally and crinkled his nose in mock disgust. “I think I have smelt bilgesnipe dung with a more agreeable aroma.”

She giggled and stuck out her tongue at him, sensing his jest. “I bet you smell really bad after training with Thor. When you’re all sweaty and stuff.”

“I don’t sweat.”

“Everybody sweats.”

He shook his head. “Well, Darcy, as you should know by now, I am not everybody.”

“Well, I’m not everybody and I still sweat. “ she replied, with a smile, peeling off her socks and tossing them at him.
Loki caught the socks before they reached his face “I noticed. It is most un-lady-like, Darcy. Perhaps you should refrain from—”

He was cut off by a stuffed dog hitting him square in the chest.

***

Darcy’s mother heard a peal of laughter from her daughter who was alone in her bedroom. Again.

She had tried desperately to get Darcy into a more social attitude. It seemed to be working. At her new school, there was no sign that she was suffering anymore. There were no calls from teachers and she didn’t come home with broken glasses or bruises. Sometimes, she even talked about people at soccer.

Not to mention, Darcy was doing very well in school. Her progress reports showed she only struggled with completing her homework and staying quiet in class.

Though despite everything, Darcy still liked to spend time in her room. In fact, given the opportunity to go out to the park or go play with other kids, she would always choose to stay by herself.

Emma Lewis had thought herself somewhat overprotective since October when she had come home and Darcy was nowhere to be found. Darius said he hadn’t seen her leave and the neighbors hadn’t seen her. But she, as a panicked mother, had gone off on a tangent as to where her lost daughter could’ve disappeared to.

She called the police, she searched around in the small woods behind her house, she even ran around outside screaming her daughter’s name.

Then, at about midnight, they had gone back to Darcy’s room to find any clues as to where she had gone, only to find Darcy curled up in bed sleeping with Fenrir snoozing protectively at her side.

She swore up and down she hadn’t seen her in her room before, really she hadn’t.

The paramedics claimed she was just over-worked and stressed. They recommended that she take the day off work.

Sighing as her motherly instincts took over, Mrs. Lewis walked up the stairs, turning down the hallways to Darcy’s room. The door was closed and down the hall she heard the shower running. She pushed open the door, not knowing what to expect when she entered her daughter’s room.

Fenrir was sitting on the bed next to a rather large stack of books, a mess of yellow and gold papers all filled with green writing.

The room felt odd.

Unnaturally still somehow.

She uneasily approached Fenrir who sat up and wagged his tail in anticipation. Emma sat down next to him, picking up one of the books. The title read Physics. It was the book Darcy had asked for in the store.

Quickly, she looked about the rest of the books, becoming increasingly more confused. Most were in some kind of runic script, the papers were maps covered in tiny writing that read things like: ‘magical anomaly’ or ‘acceleration of gravity, inconsistent’.
“What the…?” she trailed off, picking up a rather thick leather bound book with a squiggly lined title.

“I wouldn’t touch that.”

She dropped the book at the sound of those words.

It wasn’t either of her children’s voices, nor her husband’s. Emma Lewis turned to see a boy in the strangest clothing she’d ever seen. It seemed mainly black leather with bits of green scattered in. Under normal circumstances she would have said he was a cute kid. He had wide pretty green eyes, combed back black hair, and the start of fantastic cheekbones. He would be a looker once he was all grown up.

Though, at the moment, a strangely dressed boy in her daughter’s room with a snake draped artfully around his shoulders was enough to make her jump.

The snake left the boys’ arms to Emma Lewis’ side where it coiled around Fenrir…happily? The dog didn’t seem bothered at all…like this was normal.

She prepared to shout or scream, but the boy held up his hands in a calming gesture. “Forgive me for frightening you, it was not my intention.”

Mrs. Lewis’ mind drew a blank. How old was this kid? Kids didn’t talk like that. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. Who was he? What was he doing here?

“I simply meant to keep you from harming yourself. That book, when read by those who do not speak the language of the Dark Elves, will cause partial insanity.” He said, hands lowering as those green eyes swept over the room. She had never seen a child look so…intelligent. He didn’t seem anxious, but there was something off about him…like he was trying to solve a problem.

Mrs. Lewis found her voice. “Who…who are you?”

The boy let a small smile tilt his lips. “I am Loki, Prince of Asgard. Now, Mrs. Lewis, I’m very sorry for this. You appear to be a very kind woman.”

“Sorry for—“

She was cut off by Loki lifting his hands a concentrated look on his face.

In a flash of gold light, she fell unconscious.

***

Loki stared contemplatively down at Darcy’s sleeping mother.

He had not meant for her to see him, but he was engulfed in his reading when she entered. He thought only to turn himself and Jörmungandr invisible. She had poked around, which Loki understood and would not chastise. Perhaps she was simply worried for Darcy. But, it was dangerous for her to do so.

Reading some ancient texts could be…testing.

Some required magical passes to read, others were set in riddles or rhymes to keep their contents from being found out. The Dark Elven texts were always frustrating, mentally draining, and ever so informative. To open them was to bargain all your energy and half your wits. Even looking at the
words without fully understanding them could be detrimental to one’s health.

Darcy rather liked those books. She thought they were interesting.

Loki considered waking her mother and explaining his and Darcy’s friendship, but it was a risk. He realized now how dangerous mortals finding out about Asgard would be.

They did not know anything about Asgard or the Nine Realms. They had only vague ideas about what happened outside of their own galaxy. Discovering all of Yggdrasil too fast would cause turmoil in their sciences and cultures.

Instead, he cast a spell over her mother that would replace her memories of coming up to Darcy’s room with going into her bedroom to take a nap. No sooner had he done this, when Darcy appeared in the doorway, her brown hair wet and dripping, a clump of conditioner stuck in the curls. Her gaze flicked to Loki with his glowing hands over her mother’s face. “Loki!”

He finished the spell. “Believe me, Darcy, this is not as it appears to be.”

“What is happening?!” she asked, flying to her mother’s side, hair dripping onto her light blue sweater.

Loki waved his hands over the older woman’s head and she was gone in a flash, hopefully sitting on her bed downstairs. “She was about to open the book of Dark Elves.” He explained.

“Ohhhh.” Darcy nodded in understanding. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

Loki smirked and sat back down on the bed, conjuring Darcy’s brush as she sat in front of him.

They talked over her escape plan as he worked at her tangles. Prince of Chaos he may be, but this mess was beyond even him. Darcy’s scheme was to tell her parents that she had a sleepover at a friend’s house across the street. She said a girl named Carla Dawson lived there and their parents didn’t like each other very much. So, if she went over there, the chances of her mother calling to check up on her were low. She would tell her she’d just be gone for a while.

“Are you sure that will work, Darcy? The last time….”

She waved him off, “Yeah, but this is a better plan! We’ll be fine!”

He pressed his lips together skeptically, beginning to braid Darcy’s hair. He’d gotten rather apt at it lately. Darcy squirmed as he tied the end of the braid with a bit of purple elastic. “Are we ready?”

Darcy leapt to her feet, opening her backpack and listing the contents. “Gloves; check, snack bars; check, rope; check, coat; check, water bottle; check, spare underwear; check, your screwdrivers; check, crayons, pens, and pencils; check, toothbrush; check, inhaler; check.” She zipped her bag back up. “Are you going to magic stuff on me?”

Loki nodded, taking in her size. She had grown since he last conjured clothes for her. There were only subtle differences like her shoulders had become less frail, her arms and legs were slightly longer, and her body had gained some muscle from playing soccer. “Should I do it when you get back?”

“Yeah, hold on.” Darcy said, running from her room and shouting down the stairs. “MOM, I’M GOING OVER TO CARLA’S HOUSE TO SPEND THE NIGHT! I’LL BE BACK TOMORROW! I’LL BE FINE! JUST ACROSS THE STREET! IF YOU NEED ME, YOU CAN WAIT PROBABLY!”
She walked back inside, “Alright. Now that’s taken care of…”

Loki chuckled wiggling his fingers as a flutter of energy sizzled through them. Since his adolescence, his magical capacity had grown. He found himself able to cast spells he had been unable to before. Everything was faster, more powerful, and without the side effects he’d been warned of. He kept waiting to suddenly feel bitter or angry like Thor, but it never came. It was uncommon, according to most texts that this should happen. But Loki reminded himself that there wasn’t much common about him.

He lifted his hands to cast the conjuring spell that would give Darcy clothes. She needed something she could climb in and was flexible. It would be cool in the mountains, but if they managed to find a portal, there was no telling where it could take them. He gave her leather pants with tough boots to match. They would not slip on the slopes they intended to hike.

He decided that it would be wise for her to keep her undershirt and instead gave her a short leather coat that mirrored Midgardian styles. She was not accustomed to walking around in long garments and this one would not get in her way. To put it all together, he also turned her puffy Midgardian gloves into firm leather ones that would withstand extreme weather conditions (both hot and cold) as well as griffins talons.

Darcy beamed at her attire. “Woah… I look so cool. I’m like Indiana Jones! But with more black.” She exclaimed, checking herself in the mirror and messing with the ties of her coat, the purple of her undergarment peeking through at the neck. “Thank you Loki!”

“I do not require thanks, Darcy.” He reminded, ignoring the heat on his cheeks.

“I don’t need new pants but I have them anyways.” She sassed, smiling at him.

That’s another thing. The more they spent time together and the more they learned, Darcy began to get more...saucy. Her wit was sharp and quick. It heightened their friendship and never ceased to crack them up in the late hours of the night after pouring over newly found books. Darcy was, as the Midgardians put it, rubbing off on him.

He smiled back, “Indeed. I suppose I am just especially generous. Is your bag ready?”

Darcy nodded in response, grabbing her backpack and buckling it across her chest and stomach so it stayed secured to her body.

Fenrir and Jörmungandr, sensing their upcoming departure began to move around excitedly. Jörmungandr found his way around to Darcy’s shoulders, flicking his tongue across the girl’s cheek. Fenrir wagged his tail in anticipation, waiting for their trip.

Loki slid under Darcy’s bed, his friend following him closely. He took her hand, “Are you ready?”

Darcy nearly shook with enthusiasm, squeezing his arm. “Yes! Come on!”

Unable tease her any longer due to his own fervor, Loki activated the portal with a surge of magic and, once again, they were transported to Asgard where they were sure to make new discoveries.

Preferably ones that wouldn’t get them killed. Unfortunately, safety wasn’t always guaranteed.
I'm so sorry this took forever!
My life is crazy and weird, but mostly it's just that uni's got a foot up my ass.
*dramatic sigh*

Any who, I'm loving this story and I'm just so excited for what's about to happen next!!!!!
I believe some of you mentioned a baby dragon of sorts? ;)

Thank you everyone for comments and kudos and bookmarks! They all make me super excited and I'm just glad you all are enjoying reading this as much as I am enjoying writing it.
Comment if you want, but if you don't want to, refrain from commenting.
Frank Gets a Tan

Chapter Summary

Darcy gets cold. Loki gets hot. Frank has a snack(again). Frigga panics. Everybody makes a new friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Loki, I think we’re lost.”

“We are not lost, Darcy. I know exactly where we are.”

Darcy glanced around at the endless rocky surroundings, cupping her cheeks to keep them warm. “Are you sure? Because I think we’ve been here before. Look, there are our footprints in the snow.”

Loki sighed, glancing down at the map. “Yes, but we are searching for a gap in the mountain terrain. According to our studies, that should be about here!”

Darcy sat down on a rock, watching as Fenrir and Jörmungandr chased each other around the mountainside. “I know. But, it’s not. Maybe we need to be up higher. Do you think it has anything to do with the time of year?”

Loki shook his head, pacing in a circle.

They had been trekking for almost an hour now with little success. It had taken them a while to get up the hill and even longer to start searching for a portal. Loki had been almost sure that the juncture of the two closest mountains in Asgard would have enough of a forceful imbalance that a passage was bound to exist.

The two mountains that towered on either side of them blocked what little sun remained of the evening and chilled the two young adventurers. Darcy shivered, “Loki, we should…I…think….”

He kneaded his brow. “I know, Darcy. It should be here.”

She shook her head, teeth beginning to chatter. “N-no. I m-mean th-that it’s t-too c-cold.”

Loki snapped his fingers. “Darcy, you are a genius! Of course! It is too cold!”

“G-great! W-wait, shouldn’t we g-get up h-higher? B-because g-gravity?”

Jörmungandr snaked up his arm and coiled on his shoulder, scales pleasantly cool against his skin. “Yes. You’re right. We need to get higher. There should be some kind of entrance. Perhaps another cave? Now how to get up there…”

He studied the near smooth slopes of their gorge.

Darcy stood closer to him, looking up, “I-I th-think w-we n-nee m-magic.”
“Yes, I…Darcy, you’re freezing!” Loki said, fishing his mind from the pool of questions ahead of him.

“Y-yeah.” She agreed, small body overcome by shivers.

Quickly he cast a warming spell over her, rubbing her shoulders. She relaxed. “Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Aren’t you cold too?”

Loki allowed his anxiety to lessen now that Darcy’s shoulders no longer shook from the chill. “No. I do not get cold. And before you say that everybody gets cold, please keep in mind that I am not everybody.”

Darcy smirked, putting her hands on her hips in defiance. “Whatever. I bet you’d get cold if we were on Jotunheim.”

He shrugged, “Perhaps. I may also sweat if I were on Muspelheim. We will never know unless we locate a portal.”

Darcy tapped the cliff with her index finger. “It should be warmer inside the mountain, right?”

Loki rubbed his face, smoothing back his hair while he thought. “Yes…I suppose. I suspect that there will be some kind of entrance near the top. It will be warmer in there and the force of gravity should weaken that high in the Asgardian atmosphere.”

“Awesome!” Darcy cheered, bending down to pet Fenrir’s head. “So…how are we gonna get up there? We could climb. I saw a movie once where this guy, he ran at a wall and then jumped on it and climbed up it! I don’t think it’s possible though. We have a rope but…”

She trailed off as Loki turned to smirk at her. “What?”

“Darcy, have you forgotten who you’re standing with?”

She crossed her arms, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just do the magic thing and get us up there.”

With an innocent grin, Loki took her hand and teleported them to the top of the left mountain, inside a cave.

He was barely light headed by the time they reached the top.

Darcy brushed off her knees, looking about them in excitement, leaning precariously out the mouth of the cave at the ground. Fenrir whined at her feet, tugging at her pant legs.

Loki’s heart fluttered as he pulled Darcy away from the steep ledge. “Don’t do that.”

Darcy giggled. “You’re such a worry wart, Loki. You’re like my mom.”

“I dare say I am far more attentive than your mother. I am with you more often.” Loki reminded her in a whisper, flicking his gaze around the cave.

“Ha ha ha. I guess that’s true.” Darcy chastised, strutting forwards into the dark.

Loki quickly reached out and grasped her hand. “Shh, Darcy. We don’t know what’s in here.”

From the dim light at the entrance, he could see her smirk. “I’m guessing there’s a portal in here somewhere. Come on!”
He gripped her hand tighter, pulling her back to his side. “Darcy! We don’t know that for sure. Caves like this don’t just exist at the top of mountain peaks. Something had to make it. And…” he trailed off as he began to feel his surroundings. “Do you feel that?”

Darcy squirmed, looking about her. “Feel what?”

“It’s warm in here.” Loki breathed, heart hammering in his chest as he felt a rumble in the mountain.

Darcy must have felt it as well, for not a second later she was clutching Fenrir and Jörmungandr close to her chest, backing up to the ledge, Loki still clutching her hand.

Loki drew his dagger, holding it out defensively at the potential threat.

The cave was far too large for a bird of any sort. And griffins preferred vegetation to stone. He could not think of a bird that made its nest so high. Was this the home of another creature, perhaps…

From the depths of the cave came another low sound, a grumble, as the beast within stirred in the inky darkness. He raised his dagger higher, prepared for battle. No creature would harm his friends. Nothing would take Darcy away from him. Not asthma. Not—

“They’re so fluffy!” Darcy squealed, running around her prince friend to the small family of mountain goats before them.

Loki sighed in relief as the mother bleated again, the echoes sounding like roars against the cave walls. Breathing heavily, he knelt to the ground, a hand over his heart. Their chances of escape had been so few…

Darcy giggled, walking to Loki and offering him her hand. “You should have seen your face! I guess I’m glad there aren’t any deadly animals. Do you think there’s still a portal in here?”

Accepting her hand, Loki stood, brushing off his knees. “Definitely. The conditions are right and I don’t think this cavern is deep.”

“Awesome. Where do you think it goes? That’s one thing we didn’t look up is where things go. The portal to Midgard is over there, so do you think that this portal maybe goes somewhere to the left of Midgard? Or maybe above it? Or—“

“Do you feel that?” Loki interrupted, gripping Darcy’s hand tighter as they reached the end of their short tunnel.

She froze, her rambling ceased. “…I think so…it’s like…electricity…energy…?”

“Current.” Loki corrected in a whisper, bringing them closer to the wall. It was practically humming. “This is a powerful connection. It will take us a great deal farther than Midgard. If you can feel it then it must be more powerful…”

Darcy let go of his hand. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Loki snapped out of his trance-like state. “Pardon?”

His friends pouty lips turned down in hurt curiosity. “You said that it’s a powerful portal because I could feel it. Which means that you’re saying I can’t feel less powerful portals.”
Loki could feel panic rising in his chest. Now did not seem like a good time to tell Darcy she was mortal. Of course she must already know, but did she not know the drawbacks? “It was not meant as an offense, Darcy. It has nothing to do with your intelligence. It’s simply that…”

“What?” she questioned further, her inquisitiveness ruling out her distress. “Come on, I want to know why I can’t feel the smaller ones.”

He swallowed. “Because you are a Midgardian.”

She gave him an odd expression. “Is that all? I mean, you can do magic and stuff so I guess that makes sense. Hey, are you alright?”

Loki nodded, running a hand through his hair. Did she not realize the truth of this? Did she not know that he was to outlive her by thousands of years? Would she simply accept that he was more powerful than she could ever be? “I’m fine, Darcy. Perhaps we should test the portal.”

“Yeah! Do you think it will take us to Helheim? Or Jotunheim? Or Alfheim? Or…” she trailed off as Loki ran his deft fingers along the stone. “Loki?”

He held out his hand to her and she took it without question. “Ready?”

“No I look ready?” she sassed.

Loki smirked and allowed a quick flash of his magic to open the portal. In a flash of rainbow light, the two children were whisked away along with their pets that had begun playing with a baby mountain goat.

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Heimdall frowned as Loki and Darcy were transported to the far end of Yggdrasil.

He called forth a guard. “I require an audience with Queen Frigga. She needs to be here.”

The guard gave a slight bow before dutifully riding away on his horse. In almost no time at all, The Queen of Asgard was riding up on her white mare, lines of worry etched into her face. “Heimdall.”

“My Queen, you have asked me to keep a watchful eye on Loki and his friend?”

She nodded once, looking over Yggdrasil’s starry majesty. “Yes. What troubles them?”

Heimdall gripped his sword tighter as he watched the children. “They have found a passage to another realm. They’ve been researching it for some time now. They’ve managed to find one and it does not look especially safe.”

Frigga clasped her hands together, brow puckered. “Where have they gone, Heimdall?”

He turned his golden gaze to the queen, his sparkling irises full of concern. “Muspelheim.”

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“Holy FIRE BALLS!” Darcy shouted, pulling herself out of the black dirt they had landed on.

Well, Loki had landed in the dirt, and then Darcy, Fenrir and Jörmungandr had landed on him. It didn’t hurt, per se, but it didn’t feel very good either. He groaned as Darcy stared admiringly at the hazy fire-filled sky. “We’re on Muspelheim!”
Loki got to his feet, magicking the dirt from his body. “It seems we are! I have never been! Father says that Asgardians do not travel to Muspelheim unless for a necessary political conference.”

Darcy was walking in circles, eyes wide as she stared at the fiery atmosphere. “Why?”

He shrugged, joining his friend in a mindless gawk. It was truly a magnificent sight to behold. Though, he was in some mild discomfort. The air was too hot and the air seemed to burn his airways. “The King of Muspelheim is Surtur. Mother says he does not appreciate unwanted guests. The eldjötnar are said to be quite reclusive.”

“Fire Giants.” Darcy translated, turning about. He noticed her breathing was even and that they did not seem to be having the same effects to the climate. “Do you think they’ll mind if we just look around? I wonder what makes the sky look like that. It’s like someone set the air on fire.”

Loki nodded, “I don’t know how it works. But it’s a known fact that unless you are on the bifrost, it is impossible to penetrate the atmosphere unless you are eldjötnar. It’s made of flames.”

“Wow… That’s amazing. How are we breathing? We need oxygen! Well, that chemistry book said we needed oxygen to make fire too. But…can you explain it to me again?” Darcy asked, walking forwards.

Jörmungandr rolled uneasily in the hot dirt as Fenrir panted excitedly. The two made like bananas and split, running off into the expanse of black before them. The sky was an almost blood red whereas the ground looked burnt and charred. In the distance there seemed to be a hazy city of sorts. Surrounding their landscape now was a field of estranged craters and rocks.

Loki pushed back his hair to try and alleviate some of the heat. Even on Asgard he had never felt anything quite so intense. He was not sweating, but he was hot. Hotter than he’d ever been in his life.

He struggled to explain it to Darcy. “Combustion happens…basically it’s an effect of…hydrogen bonding…” he followed Darcy, rubbing his temple. “…fire is made by combustion…usually involves…a hydrocarbon, on Muspelheim it’s probably a gas in the atmosphere, and oxygen. They leave…water and a carbon….the reaction is…”

Darcy turned in time to catch her stumbling friend. “Loki?”

“Heat.” He finished his explanation, gripping onto her shoulder. He took shallow breaths, desperately wishing to cool his insides. He felt like he was boiling alive. “Darcy, would you be too disappointed if we returned to Asgard?”

She shook her head, placing a hand on his cheek. “Loki, you’re burning up!”

“The portal…” he choked, making an attempt to pull her back to where they came from.

Darcy ran to the place they had landed and felt around. “Loki, it’s not here!”

He relieved himself of her shoulder, falling helplessly on his hands and knees to the sand before them, attempting to sense the energy that would take them back to Asgard. But as Darcy had said, it wasn’t there. He looked up, “Darcy, we fell from the sky.”

She looked up from her contemplative stare at the dirt. “What?”

Loki shifted to look up at the ever-moving fiery sky. “The atmosphere is different here. The laws of physics are different. If the portal was in the sky…”
Darcy gaped at him, completely bewildered. “No…but…we didn’t study Muspelheimian physics! Do they even have books on that!? Loki, are you alright? Can you cast a spell?”

With weary eyes, Loki gazed at the miles of desolate land before them as the heat in his body grew worse and worse. “I’m fine for now, Darcy.” He raised a shaky hand to cast a very weak cooling spell over himself. With it, he was able to stand. “It will not last long. My magic is limited when my physical state is weak.” He sighed as Darcy wrapped an arm around his middle, allowing her to support some of his weight. “What do we do, Darcy?”

Darcy pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, her sharp blue eyes piercing the horizon. In all of Loki’s time with her, he had never seen such defined determination on her face. With the scorching heat of Muspelheim flushing her cheeks and the light of the sky lighting her hair, Darcy Lewis was a goddess.

“We’re going to find another portal, Loki. I’m going to get us out of here.”

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Heimdall gripped the hilt of his long sword in grim anticipation.

“What is it, Heimdall? What has happened?” questioned the Queen in earnest.

“My Queen…Loki, well, he suffers. The heat affects him, most likely because of, well…” he trailed off knowingly and Frigga placed a hand over her heart, tears welling in her eyes.

“Are they on their way back?” when Heimdall didn’t answer she spoke more firmly. “What are they doing? What has happened?”

The Guardian focused his attention on the children as they tumbled forwards. “The portal has disappeared from its place in the sky. They have set off to find a new one.”

Frigga glared at him with the scrutiny only a mother could give. “What more?”

“They are nearing a crater inhabited by eldjötnar…”

“Which eldjötnar?”

“Surtur is among them.” Heimdall answered before the Queen could finish her interruption.

She stared at him then spoke quietly, but plainly. “Open the bifrost.”

The Gatekeeper poised his sword, but hesitated. “My Queen, I must warn you, opening the bifrost now would near guarantee a war with Muspelheim. Surtur would not allow it to pass.”

Frigga made a near crazed gesture towards the peaceful looking view of Yggdrasil. “Heimdall, Loki is dying! He was not made to survive Muspelheim; it will kill him given another hour!”

“I am aware my Queen. But Asgard is not suited for war. There is turmoil on Nornheim and Vanaheim due to the rock troll uprising. And their alliance with Nidavellir would mean a bloody war. The dwarves to not always fight fair.”

Frigga was torn. She had a duty to the Nine Realms as Queen. Yet, she must uphold her duty as a mother to Loki. “How close are they to the nearest portal?”

Heimdall shook his head. “I cannot locate portals. I cannot see them and I do not know how.”
The Queen, frantic on the edge of the bifrost smoothed her dress with anxious hands. “What do we do?”

The Guardian kept his intense gaze on the fiery planet of Muspelheim. “Without starting a war, Loki’s best chance is to trust in Darcy Lewis. Though, she is mortal.”

“No.” Frigga corrected, standing up a little straighter. “She is his friend.”

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Darcy hugged Loki’s middle, trying her best to help him through the endless waves of black sand. Everything seemed heavier on Muspelheim. It almost hurt to walk alone, but walking with Loki was like lugging around dead weights.

But she tried her best.

“The gravitational force…it’s greater here.” He panted as they approached a crater. It was dark and so deep and dim that it seemed to be only a large circular pit from where they stood.

Darcy nodded in agreement, taking another heavy step. “Maybe if we could just…”

She trailed off in terror as a large hand struck the ground before them; skin the color of molten rock, underlying veins pulsing with blood like magma. Connected to the hand was an arm which pulled from the depths of that dark hole the towering body of a full grown Fire Giant.

Loki nearly fainted from the heat it radiated.

The giant looked down at them in searing fury, speaking in the language of the fire born. “Who dares enter upon the land of the eldjötnar?”

Loki froze. This wasn’t good. Lying would most likely earn him a far worse punishment. One whiff of him and they would be able to tell he was Asgardian. Darcy’s mortality was apparent nearly upon sight. “I am Loki of Asgard and this is my traveling companion, Darcy Lewis. We came here by mistake…”

A rumbling laugh that could be confused with an earthquake rose from the giant as more hot hands clawed their way from the pit. “By mistake?! How could Asgardians visit here by mistake! What treason is this?! Odin and our King Surtur had an agreement! What do you do to disrespect it, Princeling?!”

Loki thought his words through carefully. He would not make an error in disrespecting a Fire Giant on his own realm. He must play his cards wisely if he was to win the prize: his and Darcy’s lives.

“Forgive me, we did not come from the bifrost. We found our way here by our own means.” He continued.

Darcy’s gaze flicked to him nervously. She understood the language, but her rambling mouth had stopped speaking. The giant looked skeptically at them, “Tell us then, Loki, Son of Odin, why would two Asgardian younglings want on our realm?”

Another Giant spoke up. “He is Asgardian. She is not. She is mortal.”

“A mortal!” Growled the first. “Impossible! Kill her now and spare her the pain of such a life!”

Darcy found her voice and Loki wanted to close a hand over her mouth. “Wait! Don’t kill me!
Loki’s right! We came here to study Muspelheim! We were just interested in how physics and science worked on different realms!”

The eldjötnar gasped, hot air pooling about them as they chattered. “A mortal speaks our language?”

Loki stepped forth. “She is no ordinary mortal. She is my companion and is blessed with the Allspeak. She also tells the truth. We were only interested in the study of your realm.”

Another from the crowd growled. “He is the Prince of Lies! We cannot trust him! No matter how honeyed his words!”

Loki cursed his title. “My reputation precedes me. If you do not believe me, ask my friend. We wish only to return to Asgard and leave you to your peace.”

“Our peace! What would you know of peace, Asgardian! No doubt you are a spy! Sent here by the Allfather himself!” A woman shouted from the growing hoard and the Giants thumped their smooth stone shields and obsidian spears.

The heat was overwhelming and Loki felt his spell become overpowered. He clung to Darcy, hoping to maintain balance without toppling them both. “Darcy…we cannot…” the heat grew more intense, burning his belly. His eyes pricked, like tears should be sprouting there, but no moisture came.

The Giants’ protests ceased and the first spoke in his gravelly tone. “We shall take them as prisoners! See what the Allfather makes of that!”

Loki fought for the words to say, but he was utterly lifeless in Darcy’s tired arms. She spoke to them. “Wait! You’re right! This is a spy mission!”

“Darcy, what are you doing!” Loki coughed, heart hammering in his chest. Did she want them to die quicker?

“But not…” she started again as the Fire Giants began to growl in outrage. “Not of Asgard. I am a spy from Midgard. I’m part of the CIA and I’m here to figure out what kind of stuff you’re keeping in your basements!”

The fury that shook the ground was enough to make Loki pull both his friend and himself to their knees before the giants. Oh she was clever. Very clever. She was outsmarting the giants. With this encouragement, he spoke as well. “Darcy, hush! If you tell them this, than they will send a hot summer onto you in Midgard!”

Darcy fought a giggle. “Oh no! Anything but a hot summer! I like my summers cold!”

The first Giant looked like he was about to speak when an extremely large hand found its way from the pit, heaving out a eldjötnar who was as vast as the crater he climbed from.

“King Surtur.” Loki murmured to Darcy, his head resting in the dewy crook of her neck. “Ruler of Muspelheim.”

“Who dares interrupt this most sacred of meetings!?” He bellowed, his voice shifting the sand at their feet.

“A Midgardian spy and a Prince of Asgard.” Answered the first Giant cruelly, “Come to disrupt our meetings and defile our basements!”
Darcy whispered in Loki’s ear. “Do they have basements on Muspelheim?”

“I don’t think so. He probably thinks you mean their treasure vaults or something.” He breathed onto her shoulder.

With a hearty laugh, the King raised a large stone club. “Imprison them! Show them what we have lurking in our basements if they are so keen to know!”

“Wait!” Darcy shouted holding up her hands, consequently dropping Loki. “Don’t you have courts or something? Like trials! Law? Anything!? We don’t want any trouble with wars and stuff!”

King Surtur looked down at the Midgardian girl thoughtfully. “Where is your fear, little one? You are but a mortal speaking to a thousand year King! What chance would you have in a trial?”

Darcy crossed her arms defiantly. “I have a lot of chances in a trial! I’m great at talking! And you may have lived a really long time, but you know what that means?”

The King looked down at her, like this tiny girl humored him. “What?”

“It means your old!” Darcy told him, throwing out the fact like an insult.

King Surtur looked down at her in shock which slowly morphed his glowing face into rage. “If this idiotic girl wishes to participate in our trials, then let her! Midgard will suffer the loss of their spy! When she fails in combat, she will die and Midgard will suffer a hot summer! Asgard will face the threat of a war with us!”

The eldjötnar cheered and Darcy gawked. “Combat? What combat? I didn’t say anything about combat.”

Loki groaned into the black sand that cushioned his face. “The eldjötnar trials are combat based. It’s decided by who wins. Make your bargain.”

She shook her head frantically. “Loki! What are you talking about! I can’t win! There’s no way! I can’t even play soccer without almost dying!”

“And what shall the Mortal have if she wins?” Challenged the King.

Darcy shuffled her feet for a moment. “If I win, you’ll not start a war with Asgard and you’ll let us go free. And you won’t hold a grudge.”

The was a wave of disapproval from the crowd but Surtur raised a stony hand to silence them. “Is this your bargain...?”

“Darcy Lewis.”

“Is this your bargain, Darcy Lewis of Midgard?” He inquired haughtily.

She nodded once, paling at the thought of his thick club smacking against her body.

“It shall be done! Take them to our special cell! And if they survive that, then Darcy Lewis of Midgard shall have her trial!”

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“Heimdall, we must bring them back now! Loki has forty-five minutes left! I will not see him die on Muspelheim! And what of Darcy! She cannot win against a Fire Giant!”
The Guardian shook his head. “My Queen, I still must insist against it. I am bound by oath to obey you, for you are my Queen. However, I beg of you to give them more time. The cell they are off to may hold something that may help them as well as destroy them. I did not know…”

Frigga watched as Heimdall’s curious gaze swept over Muspelheim. “Did not know what?”

His brow furrowed. “I did not know such creatures still existed. The eldjötnar have been keeping them secret in a place I would not think to look.”

“Heimdall, stop it with these games. Yggdrasil is at risk.” She said, running a hand through her messed golden locks.

“It’s a dragon.”

***

Darcy had never been in jail before.

Though, she expected jails to be more like cages rather than holes in the ground, deep enough so a Fire Giant could not climb out. They had been lowered down on a platform of sorts onto the smooth warm stone that floored their cylindrical prison.

“Well, it could be worse.” Darcy said, squinting to see in the pitch black.

Loki stirred, propping himself up against the wall. “No…No I don’t think it could be.”

She knelt at his side, feeling his face. “What’s wrong, Loki? What’s happening to you? How am I supposed to beat a Fire Giant?”

He licked his lips with a dry tongue. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Darcy. I’ve never…heard of this before. Ah…” he let a whisper of agony seep through his teeth. Darcy took his hand.

“We’re going to get out of this. I don’t know how, but in stories, all the good guys usually win. And we’re good guys, right?”

He chuckled sorely. “Well, I’m a Prince of Mischief, Lies, and Chaos. And you’re you. I’m not so sure about ‘good’.”

Darcy laughed, forgetting about their situation and nudging her friend on the shoulder. “You know wha—“

She stopped talking as a warm breath of air skirted over her leather-clad shoulder. She jumped, backing into Loki. He gasped, not from the pain of Darcy landing in his lap or the heat that consumed him, rather it was the animal that paced before them.

“So that’s what they keep in their basements.” He whispered, staring at the creature inquisitively.

Darcy’s eyes stayed as wide as serving platters, gaze fixated on the winged, scaly creature before them. It was black and covered in shiny scales the color of onyx. Its snout was short and its wings were long and very delicate looking. The whole creature was as long as Darcy’s bed and about as wide. “A dragon.”

“A Galaxy Dragon. I didn’t think they were real.” Loki whispered to her, staying dreadfully still.

Darcy mirrored him, attempting to calm her heartbeat at the dragon approached them, its long nose sniffing its way up Loki’s leg and into his hair. It licked his head in contentment.
Darcy couldn’t suppress a giggle. “It likes you!”

Loki could not believe his senses. Galaxy Dragons were stories that parents told their children before bed. They told of dragons that could grow to the size of realms and change colors to match the skies of Yggdrasil. Stories told that their camouflage added to the galaxy so that not even Heimdall could see them.

It nudged at his hands, licking them in earnest. “I don’t have food.”

Darcy bent down and offered her hand to the dragon. It sniffed it and allowed Darcy to pet its scales, but it did not fawn over her hands and face like it did for Loki.

“I don’t think she wants food.” Darcy said, marveling at the dragons newly sprouted spikes.

“She?”

“She feels like a girl.” Darcy hummed, scratching the shoulder of their cellmate, receiving a deep throated purr.

Loki let his hands rest on either side of the dragon’s head, doing his best to ignore the searing pain inside him in order to study the magnificent creature before him. “You’re right. What does she want, if not food?”

Darcy tapped her chin, pacing a circle around their cylindrical cell. He could hear her humming in thought, but being unable to meet eyes with his friend, he mustered his strength to call forth an orb of light to illuminate the room.

A few things followed this.

First, the dragon attacked the light to the best of her ability. She jumped at it, playfully trying to catch it between her teeth or capturing it in her developing claws.

Second, Darcy stumbled over a cracked bit of eggshell that came up to her shoulder.

Something clicked in Darcy’s mind and she spoke quickly. “The dragon wants magic! It wants energy! That’s why she’s not licking me! I don’t have any magic! She must be a baby too….wow.”

Loki clutched his chest as an especially painful wave of heat rolled through him.

“Yes…but why do the Fire Giants have a Galaxy Dragon?” he looked to the fresh cracked egg. “…a newly hatched Galaxy Dragon?”

Darcy licked her lips, pacing around their cell. “Well, what do Galaxy Dragons do in your stories?”

“They fly around Yggdrasil and swallow stars. They were nothing but stories, Darcy. I doubt anyone…would know very much about them.” He groaned, reaching into his coat and removing his dagger. “Here. Take this.”

Hesitantly, Darcy knelt next to him, fingers skirting over the snakehead pummel. “Loki…”

He put it in her hands. “I wish I carried a sword. It would be of far more use to you when you fight them. Darcy, do not let yourself die. Forfeit if you must, the Fire Giants are not much for slaughtering children. If you give in, they will accept it.”

Darcy set the dagger down next to her. “Loki, if I give up, will there still be a war?”
He looked up at her with shining green eyes. “Yes. I am almost sure of it.”

“Man, that’s the pits.” Darcy sighed, picking up the weapon. “I’ve never fought before.”

Loki smiled weakly, adjusting her hold on the blade. “The first rule of fighting with a dagger is to never strike offensively. Not unless their back is turned.”

Her fingers brushed the back of his hand. “Loki, how will you get out if I lose? What’s wrong with you?”

He shook his head, “I’ll be fine. You will win Darcy. Or, at least, you won’t die. I’ll find a way out. I am pretty clever you know.”

She smirked giving him a light punch on the shoulder.

“Midgardian! It is time for your precious trial!” shouted a voice from above.

“Go Darcy. I promise, I shall be fine.” Loki assured as his friend’s blue eyes searched him with open fear.

Quickly, she wrapped her arms around him, giving a light squeeze. “I love you Loki. You’re my best friend.”

Loki used what little strength he had to hug her back. “I love you too Darcy. You’re my best friend as well. And we will still be best friends when this is over.”

She drew back, dagger held loosely in one hand, her other clenched in a tight little fist. “I’m ready.”

The platform used to drop them off was lowered again into their pit and Darcy stood on it, her eyes on Loki as she went up, purpose on her pouty lips.

***

“Thirty minutes Heimdall. That’s all we have. You have not spoken. What is happening?”

Heimdall shook his head. “It is impossible. Their bargain is fair, but the mortal girl has no hope of defeating a Fire Giant.”

“I am aware.” Muttered Frigga, fuming from head to toe. “This is absurd. Open the bifrost Heimdall. We shall resolve the war!”

Heimdall adjusted his sword, “My Queen, it would not be wise. I will do it, as it is your will. However, as Guardian, it is my duty to warn you that taking them now would mean war. And I have just learned that the eldjötnar have Galaxy Dragons.”

Frigga gripped the hilt of her sword. “A Galaxy Dragon?”

“No, Allmother, Dragons.” Heimdall corrected morbidly.

With an unsteady breath, Frigga relented. “Ten more minutes. If they are not safe by then, we will send for the Allfather. And he will not be pleased.”

***

Darcy followed the eldjötnar before her around a series of black craters, all seemingly bottomless
and dark. He spoke to her in a menacing tone. “We are surprised the dragon did not eat you. It has just been hatched.”

As scared as she was, Darcy’s curiosity got the best of her. “Do you raise them?”

“No, of course not. Dragons are the pride of Muspelheim! They used to flourish here in the heat, but their population has moved on from Yggdrasil. We found their wounded mother while she was nesting and bid her to put her eggs in the earth of Muspelheim.” He praised, opening his arms up wide to the hundred or so craters around them. “Still, she died after the last of her eggs had been laid.”

“Wait, so, she had that many babies?” she asked, speeding up to walk in step with the eldjötnar.

He laughed again, this time without cruelty. It was almost a paternal sound and oddly comforting. “No youngling. Only three have survived their hatching. Without the heat of a Mother’s breath, they die. Muspelheim is a sore replacement for the attention of their parent”

“That’s horrible.” Darcy said, looking down at her dagger.

“Indeed.”

They walked in silence for a while, the craters disappearing and a large open field coming into view. In the center stood the first Fire Giant she’d seen, surrounding the clearing were seemingly hundreds of towering eldjötnar. The tallest was Surtur, standing proudly in his place, a crown of flames adorning his head.

Darcy made it to the clearing, trying to hide her horror. She would forfeit. But if she did that they would start a war.

Or she could fight. Then she would die and then they would start a war.

Or, on the off chance that she won, everything would be fine.

Once in the center of the field of black sand, she stared up at her opponent. It was a male with a smooth black shield and sword. His threatening snarl made Darcy squirm.

Surtur raised a hand, calling for silence. Immediately, the eldjötnar hushed. “This is the trial of Darcy Lewis of Midgard and Prince Loki of Asgard. They are charged with being political spies for Midgard and Asgard. Darcy Lewis will participate in trial by combat against Orif. If he wins, the eldjötnar will take their claim and there will be a glorious war!” he stopped so everyone could cheer and shout words of praise at their King.

Darcy swallowed dryly.

“You may use anything at your disposal to win. The only rule remains that after your opponent is dead upon the sand, leave their shield at rest so their family may look upon the place their warrior has died. Begin!”

“Oh shoot.” Darcy sighed, pushing her glasses up her nose and holding out her dagger defensively at the roaring Fire Giant before her.

***

“Agh!”
Loki grabbed at his armor, attempting to relieve some of the burning pressure in his body. The heat was getting worse. The air hurt to breathe, and his limbs hurt to move. Still, he persevered. He had gotten them into Muspelheim, so he would get them out.

Somehow.

He had long since dispelled the magical light and The Galaxy Dragon was not pleased, going back to licking Loki’s body. It was fascinating how attracted she was to magic. Loki’s every little move made her excited, like she could sense the magic inside him stirring.

Suddenly, Loki had an idea.

He gathered up a little of his strength and cast another light in the cell.

The hatchling bounded over to it, her paws attempting to grab at it and her tongue tasting the outside.

Experimentally, he lifted the light higher and the dragon stood on her hind legs to reach it.

Higher yet, and she extended her wings to flap and retrieve the light.

Feebly manipulating the ball of energy, Loki circled it around the room and she followed, making small grunts of approval when she caught it. Finally, his tiredness won out and the light disappeared. His new friend returned to his side, nudging his hand affectionately.

He scratched at her scales earning a rumble of contentedness. “You should have a name, don’t you think? Reyna? No...no...not you. How about, Meg? No, I agree, far too Midgardian.”

He smiled as the dragon made her way around him, stretching her wings and beginning to flap around the cell. She halted in her cheerful flight for a moment to sneeze a short puff of smoke through her nostrils. That’s when Loki knew her name. “Astrid. What do you think?”

Astrid flew to Loki, gliding down to grant him a long lick, from collar to hairline. He chuckled, bracing himself on the wall to stand up. Ever so carefully, he brought himself closer to Astrid’s back. “Alright Astrid. We need to save Darcy and I can’t use magic. Oh, and we need to find Fenrir and Jörmungandr. I hope they have not wandered too far.”

***

Darcy tried to defend herself. Really she did. But then Orif growled at her and she nearly fainted on the spot.

Her opponent bashed his sword against his shield bellowing words at her that she did not hear. Instead she just held her dagger like Loki had shown her. Raised in defense.

The eldjötnar chortled merrily as Orif’s blade crashed against her own, melting it in hand. She had no option but to release it, a scalding burn spreading across her palm. “Ow! That stings! I’m going to need aloe vera!”

She looked down at the bright red splotch on her hand. “I’m going to need a crap ton of aloe vera.”

Cackling at her weakness, Orif brought his sword down again, but this time Darcy ducked beneath it, thinking fast. She wasn’t Loki. Not by a long shot. But if she could maybe just get him to not kill her right away, her forfeit wouldn’t seem so lame. Quickly, Darcy unstrapped her backpack, pulling things out of it to throw at the raging Fire Giant.
It worked as a distraction. Her crayons melted against his chest and arms, the pencils charred in his toasty glare, and her inhaler exploded on his foot. She hastily stole a sip from her water bottle and considered throwing the snack bars. But she was hungry and it seemed wasteful to throw her snack at angry Fire Giants.

Dodging another strike from Orif, Darcy opened her snack bar and took a bite. She didn’t eat dinner and it was hard to fight eldjötnar when she didn’t have any calories to burn.

Orif came at her again and Darcy went to move, but this time, the Giant had enough. He grasped her around her middle with one hand, raising her frail body to shoulder level and positioning his sword within slicing distance of her throat.

“Die little Mortal and we shall have our war!” he drew his sword back and Darcy opened her mouth to demand a forfeit just as something smooth and sleek slid up her leg and over her knee to inspect the remaining snack bar in her hand.

A telltale woof echoed from below them.

Darcy smiled broadly as the sword came down at her and she forgot her words entirely. Frank slithered his way around her neck, opening his mouth to accept the blade. Orif looked down at them in shock as his sword arm was half devoured by the snake around his Midgardian captive’s shoulders.

“What is the meaning of this!” he yelled over the gasps of the eldjötnar.

Darcy watched in a mix of relief and terror as Jörmungandr swallowed Orif’s shoulder. The more the Giant resisted, the more Jörmungandr consumed. His hold on her relinquished and she fell to the ground, keeping her eyes trained on Frank’s flat belly as he devoured his opponent till all that was left was his shield.

As horrified as Darcy was by the time Fenrir and Jörmungandr returned to her side, she still looked to King Surtur, struck silly with success. “I win. That means no war and Loki and I get to go home.”

The King stared at Jörmungandr in sheer amazement, gaze occasionally flicking to Fenrir as if he was hiding something in his fur. Suddenly, the King burst into laughter. “You are a silly girl! I have bargained for forgiveness and the avoidance of a war! You have won this, Youngling, yet we do not have a way to get you off Muspelheim!”

Darcy’s heart fell in her chest as a rather terrifying looking female with a red jeweled headdress took her by the arms and began tugging her back to the field of holes in the ground.

“Wait! That’s not fair!” Darcy protested.

“Life isn’t fair, youngling!” Surtur chortled after her.

Seething bitter rage, Darcy shouted back. “You sound like my mom!”

Fenrir licked her hand nervously while Jörmungandr flicked his tongue contentedly. Darcy shook her head at him, “Frank, where do you put it all?”

He slithered around her shoulders, positioning his mouth near the hand of the Fire Giant that held her. Darcy scolded him in a whisper. “Frank! You can’t just eat all your problems! If you eat her then Surtur will kill us! We have to find some other way out…”
“Stop that conspiring with your animals, girl! Or I will have your pretty head!”

Darcy lifted her chin to argue when she saw something just over her captor’s shoulder, soaring high above the crowd of Fire Giants.

“Loki! “ she called out in glee, tearing her arm from the grasp of her keeper.

It was a magnificent sight.

The dragon from their hole in the ground was speeding after a weak ball of light, her black wings spread wide against the blazing sky, illuminating the webby veins in them. On her back, managing to look regal in his weakened condition, was Loki. He held one hand aloft to guide the ball of light and the other held onto the dragon’s neck. His face was firm but small splotches of red were making an appearance on his face and neck. It looked like he was burning from the inside.

“No!” shouted King Surtur, rising to his full height as the dragon dove down out of the sky.

Jörmungandr wrapped his tail around Fenrir and the rest of his body around Darcy’s arm, tongue lolling as the Dragon and Loki swooped past, the Prince capturing his three friends under his arm and grunting as he lifted them onto the quickly elevating dragon.

“Loki! You made it! Are you alright?” Darcy exclaimed, situated herself on the dragon’s back positioning Fenrir and Jörmungandr in front of Loki.

He coughed in response, the magic light in front of their winged friend disappearing.

King Surtur growled from the ground. “No! You cannot take the dragon! She is too young and is the pride of Muspelheim!”

Darcy turned, yelling back. “I’m sorry! We’ll bring her back! I just need to get home! You won’t start a war will you?!”

Something that sounded like an earthquake erupted from the Fire Giant King. “No war will start, Midgardian, but you have my word there will be….”

They were so high in the hot sky by now that Darcy did not hear the rest of his vow. She looked ahead of them and she was suddenly aware of a few things. The first being that Loki was no longer conscious. His body was limp and it was only with the help of Jörmungandr and Fenrir that he had not fallen off.

Next, they were flying straight at the atmosphere of fire. And it was hot. It was really really hot.

Fenrir whined and Darcy clenched her legs onto the dragon’s back, bracing herself for the inferno that awaited them.

But it never came.

Instead, she began to feel…cool.

Testily, she cracked open her eyes gasping in shock at the starry Asgardian sky before them. “Loki, she must be able to sense portals too! Look at, she found the one back to Asgard!” she laughed, throwing her hands in the air. “We’re alive!” she cheered, wrapping her arms around Loki’s middle. He didn’t react, his lifeless form slumping against her.

“We’re alive, right?” she asked, her voice cracking. “Loki?”
The dragon grumbled anxiously, cocking her head to the side. “Can you land?”

Darcy didn’t know if she understood, or if her wings were just too tired from carrying such a load. But the dragon glided down into a small swamy clearing, laden thick with moss and dewy leaves that showered them when they met the damp earth. By the ground was a wide pool of water that stretched peacefully to where the trees began again.

Darcy slid from the dragon’s back, pulling Loki with her. She knelt next to the water, with nothing but the moon to light her friend’s burnt face. “Loki? Loki, come on! Wake up!” she shook his chest, tears threatening her eyes. Fenrir licked Loki’s cheek, as if trying to coax him back to life. Jörmungandr flicked his tongue on Loki’s nose like he had when he was smaller.

He still didn’t move.

“She begged quietly, hugging his chest. The moisture in her eyes spilled over in one heartbreaking sob, a single tear falling to the undisturbed water before them.

Ripples fanned out across the expanse of the pond, the small swells morphing into waves that splashed the earth, making mud of the shoreline. Darcy stared curiously at the water for a moment, watching the water still through overflowing eyes.

Hesitantly, she placed in the pool her hand that had been burned by Loki’s melting dagger.

Instantly, the burn cooled and steam rose from the water as her flesh was mended by the pond. She gasped, pulling her hand from the healing pond and checked her palm. It was smooth, pink, and unblemished by the scar that would have been sure to show.

Darcy looked to the Galaxy Dragon in distress. She was nudging Loki’s hair with her nose. She blinked at Darcy expectantly, her eyes wide and midnight blue.

“You knew this was here?” Darcy asked, taking Loki’s hand. The Dragon’s eyes flicked from Loki too Darcy again. Darcy shook her head. “I know what you’re thinking, but what if it doesn’t work? What if—“

Her words were cut off by a loud splash as her new friend pushed the scorched prince into the pond. Darcy gasped, hurrying to the edge of the pool where Loki’s body had sunk beneath the dark surface. Staring down, all she could see was her reflection.

Fenrir peered down into the water, ears perking up as he pounced into the small body of water as well, followed closely by Jörmungandr. Darcy glanced frantically to the dragon that seemed to smile widely, bending over the water to drink deeply.

Darcy had been scared on Muspelheim. Terrified even. But now…she was mortified. What if they had all died? What if Loki was dead and his body was lost? What if Fenrir and Jörmungandr never surfaced?

With another panicked look in the dragon’s direction, Darcy eased her feet into the water and splashed into the pond, surprised at how deep it was. Gauging herself, Darcy took a deep breath, prepared to dive down when something grabbed hold of her foot.

The air she had been preparing to hold rushed out of her lungs, daring to be filled with water if the same hand that grabbed her foot hadn’t moved under her arms to hold her up.

“One would not say it is wise to jump into a lake when you cannot swim.” Breathed a voice from behind her.
Darcy jumped so high she nearly flew from the pond. “Loki!” she turned to give him a tackling bear hug which didn’t work out too well because they were in water and the second she latched onto him, they began to sink.

Before they could descend entirely, the dragon took hold of Loki’s collar and pulled them onto land. Fenrir and Jörmungandr paddled around the water happily, as if nothing had happened on Muspelheim at all.

“Thank you Astrid.” Loki said, rubbing the muzzle of their faithful friend.

Darcy pet her as well, relief flooding her features. “Astrid? Is that what you named her?”

Loki smiled, turning to his short Midgardian companion, “No. It was her name long before I gave it to her.”

They stared at each other for a moment, a sense of reprieve flowing through both of them. Loki grinned wider, planning to say something when Darcy drew back her fist and clocked him right on his pretty cheekbone.

Loki stared at her blankly as Darcy’s face turned red from hairline to neck. “What were you thinking!? Didn’t you know that you were allergic to fire!? Loki you were dead! And you left me and I hate you!” she shoved him in the chest once more before locking her arms around him in a tight embrace. “Don’t do it again.”

Still caught in shock, Loki rubbed his face where she had hit him before returning her hug. “I’m sorry, Darcy. In my defense, I did not know that I was, how did you put it, allergic to fire? And I wasn’t dead.”

“Yes you were.” Darcy argued into his wet shoulder.

“No.” Loki shook his head, “I was only mostly dead.”

Despite herself, Darcy giggled, not letting go of him. “I still hate you.”

“Yes. I can tell by the affection you are showing me.” He agreed, resting his cheek on her hair as Astrid dove into the pool with Fenrir and Jörmungandr.

Darcy sighed. “Promise me you won’t die again.”

“No one can promise that…”

“Promise me, Loki!” she insisted backing away to look him in the eye. He melted, in the best of ways, under her blue stare.

He placed a hand over his heart, “I, Loki Odinson, swear by the Nine Realms and my life that I will not die again while Darcy Lewis lives….”

“Or, at least, like, tell me first.”

“…..lest I tell her first.”

She held out her smallest finger and they linked pinkies.

Satisfied, Darcy let go of him, her hands on her hips. “Awesome! Well, I’m sorry about your dagger, it got melted when I fought. But then Frank ate Orif.”
“He does that.” Loki smiled sitting down on the mossy earth, feeling his magic return. Though it seemed to be back in full force, he felt utterly exhausted. So much that he barely felt the impact of the legendary healing waters his and Darcy’s pets were playing in. “Do you know what this is?” he gestured to the pond.

“No.” Darcy shook her head, “What is it?”

“In Asgardian legends, it is the called the Waters of Resurrection. It’s supposed to cure any malady and heal any injury. They are supposed to be mythical.” He explained, running a hand through his wet hair.


He elbowed her back. “Yes.”

“Maybe it healed my asthma. Because my inhaler got melted by a Fire Giant.” She joked as Astrid pulled herself from the water, droplets clinging to her shiny scales.

In the Asgardian night, with the stars of Yggdrasil glowing bright in the sky, Darcy could see why Astrid was called a Galaxy Dragon. Her scales shone like each was an individual star. When she spread her wings and flew off into the sky, Darcy almost lost sight of Astrid amongst the lights.

“Wait!” she called after her friend. “Where is she going? Isn’t she going to stay with us?”

Loki stood next to her, eyes trained on the flickering stars above. “No. She is a dragon. She cannot live simply on one realm. She would not be happy.”

Darcy watched in mystification. “Do you think she’ll visit?”

“I’m sure of it.”

They were silent for a few seconds. Then Darcy spoke again, voice thick. “I didn’t even get to thank her properly. She saved us.”

Loki felt a rush of gratitude towards Astrid, melancholy emotion running through his bones. “Yes. I owe her my life.”

Darcy sighed, crossing her arms and clicking her tongue at a soaked Fenrir who was now rolling in the mud with Jörmungandr. They both seemed far too pleased with themselves. “So, where did you want to go next?”

“Jotunheim.” Loki said, and they looked at each other seriously for a moment before breaking down into the greatest fit of unrestrained laughter there ever was.

***

Frigga relaxed, her shoulders at last as Heimdall smiled. “How did you know where to get their dragon to land?”

She offered him a sly grin, once again at peace. “A Queen does not reveal all her secrets, Heimdall.”

“A Queen has secrets?” he asked innocently.

She laughed lightly, “I suppose not…a mother then.”
Heimdall nodded knowingly, shifting his gaze back to Yggdrasil and chuckled.

“What are they doing now?” Frigga asked curiously.

The Guardian shook his head. “They are discussing the location of their next portal.”

“Oh Gods, not again…”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry about not updating quicker! My life is a shit shack! Well, I wish my life was a shit shack, that way I could complain about it more. In actuality, I'm just busy. *sigh* This is a gif that accurately represents how my studying and I are role-playing. I am Loki (of course, I'm just that good looking) and my homework is Jane. When finals arrive, there will be a hulk calling me a 'puny god' and I will lay my sorry ass down to write fanfiction.

So, about that dragon...
I know that a lot of requests with the baby dragon thing had to do with Darcy and Loki having a pet dragon to keep around and hide from her parents, so on and so forth. However, I decided against this for a few reasons.
First: I wanted Darcy and Loki to fly on a magic dragon.
Second: they already have two pets and I have no idea how to incorporate a third. I felt it might be too much for me if their lugging around Fenrir, Frank, and Astrid.
Third: I have plans...In the future...for the dragon...*wink wink*

Just as an added point, I shamelessly referenced the Princess Bride. I laughed really hard at myself when I wrote it.
Also, when Loki hands Darcy his dagger, it took all my willpower not to make a Game of Thrones reference and have him tell her to stick them with the pointy end. It didn't happen because I thought they still might be a little too young for Game of Thrones. Maybe. Probably.

Thank you everyone for your comments and kudos and I love you all! You're such brilliant people and I just can't wait for what comes next!
Darcy’s messy-haired head was slumped onto her desk as she slept through another boring math lesson.

“Darcy Lewis!”

Her eyes shot wide open and she sat up, frantically looking around till her gaze rest upon a stern Ms. Cutter, the sixth grade pre-algebra teacher. “Darcy, would you please tell us the value of x?”

Rubbing her eyes, Darcy shoved on her glasses, none too gently, and glanced at the board. It was so simple. It seemed redundant to even answer. She let her head collapse back on her desk in exhaustion. She’d stayed up all the previous night reading texts from Muspelheim about their atmosphere. It had almost killed Loki and she wanted to know why. She wouldn’t let it happen again. Loki’s health was a concern to her, mainly because she hadn’t seen him since Muspelheim. Her winter break had ended, she was back at school, and Loki had not visited her for a few weeks. She even had a Christmas present for him!

But there had been nothing in any books about Aesir having an aversion to flame. It was stated that Frost Giants had fatal problems on Muspelheim, but Loki was not a Frost Giant. “Darcy Lewis!”

Darcy shook her head to clear her thoughts. “What?”

“Would you please give us the answer to the question on the board?”

Darcy crossed her arms bitterly. She was so frustrated. Maybe if her teachers taught her something she didn’t already know, she could figure out why Loki almost died. She could be halfway to Vanaheim by now if she didn’t have to do their worksheets and answer dumb questions to find the stupid value of x. “Why? I don’t want to.”

Ms. Cutter grimaced in annoyance, the class giggling a bit at their silly schoolmate. “You don’t want to? Do you know the answer? It’s okay if you do not understand, but I am just asking you to try it.”

“I don’t want to try it. I already know all this! You’ve been teaching the same thing for the past three weeks!” Darcy protested, standing up.

“Darcy, if you don’t stop this, I’m going to send you to the principal’s office.” Her teacher said sternly.

Darcy only got more irritated. “What?! I just want to learn more!”

“Darcy, please wait out in the hallway. I will be there in a second, and we will call your mother if
need be.” Ms. Cutter demanded with finality.

Angrily, Darcy stomped out into the hall where she slumped against the wall, crossing her arms. She would much rather be on Asgard. Or on Alfheim. Even soccer practice was better than this. Maybe she would go run away and live with Loki so they could spend all their time learning together. That sounded much more fun than the lecture she was going to get from Ms. Cutter.

Her mom didn’t make anything better either. Darcy was going to have to start carrying around a cell phone because apparently her parents worried about her. Little did they know that cell phones don’t have reception on Asgard. So it wasn’t going to be much use to them, was it?

Sighing, Darcy picked at a scab on the back of her hand and went back to thinking about Loki and the universe.

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Loki exhaled deeply, pushing yet another book aside, bringing his attention back to the court meeting taking place.

He had been researching Asgardian aversions to fire for nearly two hours and he had found nothing.

There were no stories, no accounts or warnings of Aesir ever being burned as he had on Muspelheim. He even had Eir and her healers look over him but they found nothing wrong with his current state. Even now, as he moved on to creating spells to check up on his health, he found not a hair out of place.

Jörmungandr coiled into his ouroboros state, the end of his tail in his mouth, sliding around in circles as he did when his Asgardian friend was perturbed.

Loki sat back in his chair, petting Jörmungandr’s head.

It had been weeks since he and Darcy had gone to Muspelheim and he had not been to see her since. His duties on Asgard had spiked and he found himself sitting through countless meetings, his fingers sore from taking notes and his jaw hurting from clenching it so hard to avoid speaking.

As far as Asgardian custom went, he was too young to offer input in any of the conferences. He was only supposed to stand by and listen.

It was quite irritating.

Loki had never doubted anyone of the court before, but seeing them discuss Asgard’s future, he began to question their credibility. Most were decent and sought to keep the peace in Yggdrasil. Others courted power in the most devious of ways, suggesting that they ‘liberate’ certain ethnic groups on Vanaheim that were conveniently inhabiting very fertile land and a great deposit of gold nearby.

Of course, no one bothered to inquire about this and discussed only whether Asgard’s army should be used for other things. It surprised Loki how no one talked about the people of the city they intended to murder. According to the books he had read about the remaining and illustrious indigenous civilizations of Vanaheim, they were quite happy and prospered as much, if not more, than Asgard. A few of the villages were smaller and they were not quite as fond of golden palaces, but they made brilliant technology and trinkets that Loki had only read about.

Yet, he was forced to hold his tongue.
And through all of that tongue holding, his one true solace was Odin Allfather; otherwise known as the only person in the council with half their wits about them.

His father understood the Nine Realms better than any member of the court. Loki found it almost hysterical how Odin went about making decisions. He would sit in his chair at the head of the table with his scrutinizing glare washing over all the nobles, allowing them to discuss everything they wished. Once they neared a consensus, he would stand and declare whether he liked the idea or not and why.

Loki found it quite admirable how no one argued with the Allfather.

Well, almost.

There was still his brother, who was actually allowed to give input during the conferences. And he was also the dullest buffoon there. He talked like a child, grasping at any opportunity to go into battle, to break the peace and start a war to supposedly ‘bring glory to Asgard.’

It was very annoying.

Loki wasn’t entirely one sided on the matter. He could admit that war had benefits. The crown held a great supply of wealth that would be put to use should a war occur. They would require steel and armor, and blacksmiths would eat like kings for as long as the battle went on. The people of Asgard would reaffirm their pride in their realm and they would be a stronger kingdom because of it. They had enough men to win any battle and the land, if dealt with properly, could be beneficial to the capital city’s beginnings of a skirmish with Nornheim.

The Asgardian province had been less than enthused with the attention it was receiving from the capital as it was. Their reasons were truly petty, using their lack of glorified Lords as an excuse for the royals not hosting any celebratory banquets in their halls.

So, they had gone off to provoke the people of Vanaheim’s provinces over money they apparently owed one of the high-lords due to a marriage several generations ago.

It was a pointless conflict and it was not worth the war.

Angering Vanaheim would cause unrest in Alfheim. The elves were well divided. Unlike Asgard, they held multiple parties in their council. This system allegedly allowed them to discuss and come to more wholesome conclusions. Loki believed this to be quite inventive. Though, the various opinions made things more confusing. It was indefinite; if a war did start between Asgard and Vanaheim, whose side they would take?

Then there was Jotunheim.

Laufey, King of the Frost Giants, would seize the opportunity to partake in any war against Odin. And no one, not a soul, wanted to go to war with the Jotunar. Except for Thor. It seemed Thor wanted to go to war with everyone by how he was talking.

Loki frantically took notes, writing his ideas in the margins. Darcy may be a quick learner of math, science and magic, but it was politics that had captured her heart. To be honest with himself, Loki found it all a bit dry and full of tactless limits. But Darcy saw it as a challenge. She spoke of Asgardian politics like she had sat through every meeting with him and expressed her input with the voice of a leader. He truly hoped she would be president one day.

The meeting was adjourned and Loki stood, relieved to be at the end of their tiresome speeches. He snapped his journal shut, magically retying the leather straps, and preparing to leave when his
father called out. “Thor, Loki.”

The two brothers turned to him, “Yes Father?”

His face was weary from the meeting, yet his eyes twinkled nonetheless. “Walk with me, my sons.”

Strolling by either side of the Allfather, Loki and Thor cast each other nervous glances as the three walked to the gardens. Odin spoke at last when they came to an especially tall fountain. He sighed contentedly. “As a King and a father it is my duty to educate the future rulers of Asgard in how to deal with such matters as war.” He paused to turn to them, his gaze sharp, Gungnir standing tall in his grasp, “And I know that you both are capable of learning.”

He pointed Gungnir at Thor, slowly, as if not to catch him off guard. “Thor, this dispute with Nornheim, how do you believe it should be settled?”

Thor stood proudly, his gaze steady on the Allfather. “I believe we should charge Vanaheim now while they’re not expecting it. And we must conquer that spot of land before anyone from surrounding cities gets used to Asgard being idle during a threat. We shall bring pride to the Realm Eternal.”

Loki fought rolling his eyes at this. It was as if his brother heard of war and nothing else.

“Loki,” his father began, pointing Gungnir in his direction, “Why do you think this is a terrible idea?”

His eyes widened, gaze shifting to Thor then back to his father, “I never said it was a terrible idea.”

“My son, you sit through discussions of war like someone has put spikes on your chair.” He smiled, bringing Gungnir back to his side. “Enlighten us.”

Lifting his chin, Loki focused his attention on the Allfather, not daring to meet Thor’s eyes. “I believe that it would not be well suited for Asgard to fight Vanaheim.”

Odin stared down blankly, as if unpleased with Loki’s response. “I asked you why. Give me one answer. There are several reasons, I want to know the most important.”

Loki almost hesitated. But princes should not hesitate when questioned. “Jotunheim.” He said steadily.

“Explain.” It was one word and it showed no mercy.

“If any war breaks out, Laufey will not miss an opportunity to engage Asgard in battle. We are prepared to fight Vanaheim, or the Dwarves, we are even prepared to beat Muspelheim...on the...erm...off-chance that instance may occur...however, fighting Frost Giants requires specific training that has not been taught for nearly two thousand years and equipment that needs updating. More than that, most Asgardians are not familiar with Jotunheim’s terrain. We would be at a disadvantage.” Loki finished, no longer fearful of his father’s scrutiny. He was caught up in his explanation.

Odin glanced between his sons for a long while; Loki feared he might smite them given the chance. Finally, he spoke. “Loki, I grant you permission to speak at any council meeting you desire. It is far too painful to watch you bite your tongue the entire time. Thor, fighting Vanaheim would be an advantage to Asgard if not for the other forces in Yggdrasil. Broaden your strategies.”
Loki’s elation may have overpowered Thor’s exasperation. “So we will not be fighting them?”

“No.” Odin said shortly and turned on his heel, gesturing for the boys to follow him. They went after their father, unsure. They walked through the gardens and back into the palace, where they continued following him down the halls. “Loki does bring up an excellent point. Thor, did you catch it? I’m sure you would.”

“…we lack…training?” he answered slowly.

“Precisely.” Odin confirmed firmly, leading them out of the palace, through the courtyards and into the guard training grounds. Loki and Thor and warriors in training were not allowed to use it. “Frost Giants fight unlike any other group we’ve ever challenged in battle. We lost many warriors on the field to them before Asgardians were well enough trained to defeat them.” He sighed heavily, stopping near the edge to watch the men practice. “They have not been taught this technique, which is unwise due to the constant threat of Jotunheim. It is a possibility, especially with Nornheim’s petty ‘rebellion’, that we may go to war again. But we will try our best to avoid it.” He eyed Thor, “A good king does not seek out war.”

The golden prince scowled. “So why are we out here then? If we aren’t going to war?”

Odin raised his white brows skeptically, walking around the field of fighters to a separate arena typically used for captains and high position officers. “The Princes of Asgard should know how to defeat Frost Giants. And you will learn from the greatest Jotunn slayer there ever was.”

Excitement gathered in Thor’s sparkling blue eyes, “Who is it?”

Odin rolled his shoulders, a slight smile on his lips, “Why me, of course.”

Loki felt like a weight had dropped heavy on his chest. If he was to be fighting his father…he was doomed.

“Arm yourselves.” Odin demanded, pacing before them, his armor shining brightly in the Asgardian midday sun.

Thor raised Mjolnir with delight, shooting his brother a smug look and Loki paled. He may have the upper hand in a strategy meeting, but he was hardly a match in learning fighting styles that didn’t involve magic. Slowly, he took out his dagger.

He’d decided that after two of them had been either lost or destroyed in the past couple of months, it was time he forge himself a more reliable weapon. Yesterday, he had spent his time crafting his new blade to be easier for throwing, return to him when he needed it, and enchanted it with several spells to keep it from melting or freezing or getting dull. He would make himself a set of them when he had time.

Odin positioned Gungnir defensively so it barred the front of his body. “The Jötnar fight without order or mercy. They are unruly and monstrous. To defeat them, is to fight in their likeness.”

Thor grinned wickedly, his grip on Mjolnir tightening. “Can you show us, Father?”

“No.” Odin said shortly. In one frighteningly fast move, he swung Gungnir low, hitting the boys behind their knees, effectively knocking them both to the ground.

Thor was up in an instant, swinging Mjolnir at his father who blocked, kicked and attacked with blinding grace. Thor would have died a hundred times in the first ten minutes. They fought ruthlessly, all the while, Odin shouted words of cruel encouragement. “You cannot kill a Frost
It didn’t take Thor long to catch on. In fact, when fighting, Thor was most proficient. He adapted to Odin’s moves and was soon swinging and grunting with the strapping valor of a true warrior. Still, Odin pushed him further, taunting with scrutiny that only drove Thor to do better. “Harder! You are fighting a giant beast, you cannot kill them by lightly tapping their knees with your hammer!”

Thor bloomed to the challenge, attacking more violently, his skills and movements ruthless, unplanned, and ever so destructive. He chucked up patches of the earth and sweat with a passion for battle Loki had never seen in anyone before. Fighting their father in his silver winged helm and armor, Thor Odinson looked like a king.

Finally, Odin ended the fight by whacking him down to the ground and aiming Gungnir at his eldest son’s chest. Thor was angered, but the Allfather smiled. “Very well done, Thor.”

Grinning, Thor jumped up, not even bothering to brush the dirt from his proud shoulders. Loki tried to keep his breathing steady as Odin called him forwards. He could not fight like Thor. He could fight when he had magic and tricks, but he was not strong enough to match his father, nor was he skilled enough with an offensive weapon.

Odin brandished Gungnir, telling Loki that he was about to attack. Mentally, Loki ran through all the things he remembered about using a dagger to duel. One must use their blade as an extension of the arm, keep it close, and keep movements—

His musings were cut short as a blast of light whizzed by where his body would have been had he not moved. He looked up, and just like that, Odin was coming at him again, striking with Gungnir in a style that was so fluid, Loki feared he may drown.

“Fight! You cannot kill a Frost Giant by dodging their blows!” Odin taunted, successfully bashing Loki in the shoulder. He managed to keep standing, bringing up his dagger to meet the next blow of Gungnir. The force made his arm shake and his body jolt with effort. So he retreated, spinning around his father to a position where he could throw his dagger at his back if need be.

But this wasn’t that type of fight. In this battle, Loki needed to get his father into a position where he could not fight back, or disarm him.

When Odin turned on him again, Loki made the rash decision to meet his strikes with both his dagger and arm, aiming to keep his face from being impaled. As their bout progressed, Loki tried several times to match Thor’s brute force, but he was simply not strong enough and his weapon was not made for it. Odin moved too fast and Loki’s growing frustration was only heightened by the Allfather’s increasing strength.

Loki had never seen the Allfather in the heat of battle, but the stories of his might were legendary. The bitter clench of his jaw and unforgiving knot of his silver brow intimidated him to the point that Odin’s next jab had him flat on his back, Gungnir to his throat.

Yet, unlike his spar with Thor, Odin did not withdraw. He only glared down at Loki with unquestionable contempt. His eyes glinted with fury and Loki feared for his life. His father had never looked at him with such hatred and aggressiveness before. Gungnir moved to his face, the point imbedding in the arch of his cheek.

Loki held up his hands in surrender, his breathing rapid, and his confusion battling with his fear in earnest.
Suddenly, Odin’s expression changed, his shaking ferocity morphing into shocked realization… like he just remembered where he was and what he was doing. Immediately he withdrew Gungnir, and Loki felt a sharp stab of pain and a trickle of blood from the fresh cut in his face. He stood slowly, carefully stowing his dagger in its sheath.

“Father…?”

“Thor, we shall meet tomorrow. Loki, you will practice with Thor separately. You cannot fight a war with tricks and magic.” He said plainly, back straight and one-eyed gaze fixated on his eldest son, purposefully avoiding Loki’s eyes.

On that word, he turned and left, his golden cape swishing behind him as he stormed away.

Thor clapped his brother on the shoulder, laughing. “Father must have been truly upset by your fighting, brother!”

Loki touched the bleeding wound on his face, drawing his hand away to see the fingertips coated in blood. Because he was Aesir, injuries tended to heal faster for him. The bruises that coated his body would be gone within an hour and the gravel burn on his palms would disappear in the next ten minutes. However, a cut from Gungnir would not heal so easily. He would need to magically cleanse it then perform a healing spell before it could get infected.

But Loki could not think of that. His confidence was being torn apart as he ignored Thor’s commentary, making his way to the library. He was met in the hall by Jörmungandr who had taken to exploring places he shouldn’t when he wasn’t frightening the members of the court. Loki tended to only be present at meetings with his friend draped around his shoulders.

Jörmungandr coiled himself around Loki’s waist, stretching his body up to his shoulder. Loki sighed, comforted only slightly by the no longer small snake mouthing his jaw. It was a good thing he did not have teeth, otherwise it would be a very painful cuddle.

Nodding to Lady Asta, Loki rushed back to his table in the library, resting his head in his hand. What had he done wrong? Was it his technique? It was most certainly his technique. He would have to work on it. His father was right, he could not be a king, or even a good prince if he could not even fight in a war! How daft could he be?! No, he must work harder. Asgard needed more than this from its Prince. He was not meeting the Allfather’s expectations, perhaps he should not even be a prince! He would have to practice more spells, perhaps work on inventing more spells. But he would take time out of reading for pleasure for practicing with Thor.

Even as he reflected on his options, Loki’s thoughts were driven to Darcy. How could he protect her on their adventures if he could not even protect himself!? How could he do anything right if he did not start expanding his knowledge?!

Shaking with rage, Loki tore a few books from the shelves and tossed them onto the table. He needed to…he had to…

“Prince Loki?”

Just like that, Loki composed himself. He straightened his back and suppressed his temper, letting it seep down to his toes. “Lady Sigyn, how may I help you?”

She looked beautiful today. Her hair was pinned back from her face and the blonde hairs hung to the waist of her silver and blue dress. But concern was etched onto her face. “…I saw you walking down the hall…” she trailed off shyly, then found herself again. “…are you…are you hurt very
badly, my prince?”

Remembering his injury, Loki touched the mix of drying and wet blood on his cheek. He cleared his throat, looking down at his book. “Tis but a scratch.”

Timidly, Sigyn approached him and for the first time, he noticed a small jar in her hand. She sat in the chair next to him, looking slightly fearful of Jörmungandr’s ouroboric spin. She shook her head, elegant jaw firm.

Loki watched her with wide eyes as she opened the jar and dipped her fingers into the thick yellow paste. It was an herbal concoction used for cuts made by weapons from Baldor’s Forge. Baldor was Odin’s favored smith and it was said that his steel could burn gods. Only this paste, Essence of Fray, and a spell could properly heal the wounds his weapons made without causing a scar.

With two of her fingertips coated in the substance, she lifted her hand, stopping only inches from Loki’s face, as if asking permission. He nodded in consent, allowing her fingers to smooth over the cut. Only now as the herbs were worked over his face did he realize how deeply Odin had sliced him.

This revelation seemed insignificant as his mind was completely taken over by the touch of Sigyn’s fingers still on his cheek, their eyes locked. Her palm touched the hollow of his cheek, the heat of her warming him to the bone. With hesitant movements, Sigyn leaned in closer so Loki could see every one of her blonde eyelashes glow in the afternoon sun.

At first, he feared at what she may have planned. Would she bite him, or perhaps she wanted to whisper some taunt that she worried may be heard by a ghost amongst the shelves? But she only leaned in a bit more to cautiously press her lips to Loki’s unharmed cheek.

He felt the blood rush to his face and before he could compose himself, Sigyn had stood, curtsied, and was breezing away. Jörmungandr stopped slithering in a circle to look up at his friend, slack jawed.

Loki could only stare at where Sigyn’s silver dress had disappeared around the corner of a shelf. It was not proper for a lady to show such familiar affection, yet he was glad she had.

His rage had subsided and in its place brushed a fresh wave of inspiration. His previous anxiety had not gone away, but it had changed from anger into something softer. He knew now what he needed to do. “Jörmungandr, we need to go see Darcy.” He searched the shelves for books they would need. “If I cannot defend us and I die, she will not live. I will teach her to defend herself.”

That night, Loki decided he would abandon any responsibilities he had. He had not seen Darcy in far too long and he missed her dearly. He had not been out of the palace since their excursion to Muspelheim. He was sure Hel had returned to Niflheim.

Jörmungandr, sensing he was going to see Darcy and Fenrir, made a sound of excitement.

Quickly, Loki gathered his books and dagger, making his way to the stables where he called for Hel. As he guessed, she was not there. He waited a few moments after calling her name and soon she was trotting up the stairs, looking excited to see him. He walked to her, rubbing her neck and touching his forehead to her nose. “I’m sorry, Hel. I have been quite busy.”

She whinnied, nudging him to get onto her back. He did so, Jörmungandr slithering behind him on her saddle. Adjusting the saddlebag and stirrups, Loki urged her to trot on in the direction of the setting suns. As he reached the gate exiting the palace grounds, he looked back over his shoulder.
He had not told his mother he was going, nor anyone for that matter. Perhaps it would seem like cowardice to run after being defeated. Though, at the moment, he could hardly care. Darcy was more important than any pride he might still have.

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“Odin, what were you thinking?” Frigga sighed, leaning into her palm.

The Allfather paced the room, still in his armor and in clear distress that no one outside his bedchamber had ever seen. “That I was back on Jotunheim and I had just won a war.” He muttered, mostly to himself.

“Odin…”

He turned to his wife, face red and boiling with rage, “Can you truly pretend not to see it Frigga?”

She stood as well, face stern. “See what?! That he is an intelligent, thoughtful young prince that only wants the best for Asgard?”

“You know what I mean….” He growled. “I could hardly fight him without seeing it. He looks exactly like—”

“He is our son, Odin. I beg you to remember that.”

“Our son…” he murmured, grunting softly. “You truly believe that?”

Frigga’s brow knitted. “Of course. What has brought this about? You have never questioned him before. Why now? What has happened?”

Odin shook his head, resuming his pacing. “Loki has never been strong. He does not have the strength of a full grown Aesir, let alone one of them…”

“Odin…”

“…but he is somehow a skilled fighter because of it. He does not learn other styles of fighting because he cannot use them. And today…”

There was a stretch of silence as Odin stopped moving, staring at the wall before him. Frigga waited patiently for him to continue, her hands folded over her knee.

“Today I disarmed him exactly as I did Laufey.” He finished, kneading his brow. “I have no doubt in my mind that Thor would be a fine king once he learns. He is truly an Asgardian fighter and will be none less than the best when he comes of age.”

“But?” Frigga questioned, knowing her husband all too well.

“But I fear Loki would make a far better ruler.”

Frigga smiled kindly. “He was born to be a King as well.”

“Yes…but not of Asgard.” He reminded.

She frowned, turning away contemplatively. “No…not of Asgard.”

They were silent for a long while, both fighting their own internal battles. They finally spoke at the same time.
“—I think we should tell him of his heritage—“

“—I think you should take away his magic—“

They looked at each other, expressions of upheaval apparent on their faces. Frigga answered first. “No. I will not do that to him! You cannot take away a sorcerer’s magic, Odin! If I took away Gungnir, you would hardly be able to walk straight you’ve been holding it up for so many years! Magic is a part of Loki and I would no sooner take Mjolnir from Thor.”

He held a firm stance. “Well we most certainly cannot tell him of his heritage! That would mean revealing him to the entire court! There will be an outrage! There will be a time and a place where, in a few years, we can reveal him and—“

“And what?” Frigga asked, a hint of aggressiveness sinking in.

Odin raised his chin defiantly. “—and mend the bond between Asgard and Jotunheim. Loki will marry a Jotunn princess and peace will once again be restored to Yggdrasil.”

Frigga raised a brow. “That is a terrible plan. Odin, any princess on Jotunheim would be his sister by blood.”

Odin pursed his lips in embarrassment. “Ah…I…did not think of that. It is no matter! Any noble of Jotunheim will do.”

The Queen approached him, blonde hair whipping around her face. “Odin, tell me this has not always been your reason for taking him…”

He said nothing.

“…Odin, he is my son. He is your son.”

“I know.” He sighed, striding to a window to watch the night sky. “He is a boy. But he will not be for much longer.” He turned back to his wife. “Soon, he will be a Frost Giant.”

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Loki gently shook Darcy’s shoulder. “Darcy,” he whispered.

She grumbled in her sleep, shoving her head under her pillow. “I don’t wanna go to school.”

“I will not make you go to school. Perhaps instead, we can run away to Jotunheim. I hear the snow is lovely this time of year.”

Darcy gasped, sitting up. “Loki!”

He embraced her before she could finish her rambled greeting. He had truly missed Darcy. Two weeks without her friendship was equivalent to torture of sorts. Her hair was messy and it tickled his nose, but he hugged her anyways, unable to shake the thought that she would not always be there.

“Where have you been? I thought you were dead! We aren’t ever going to Muspelheim again! I’ve reread all the books on everything from politics to herbs and I don’t have anyth—what happened to your face?”

Loki released her, pushing his hair back into place. “I lost a duel with the Allfather.”
Gently, Darcy raised a finger to brush over the crusted paste that Sigyn had rubbed on his wound. His neck heated at the memory. “Is this Essence of Fray?” she inquired thoughtfully.

“I believe so.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Why didn’t you use magic? I was looking at the book on healing… couldn’t you use a cleansing spell and then a healing one? You got poked by Gungnir, right?”

Loki’s could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks. “Well… I didn’t... someone else tended to my wounds.”

“Oh. That makes more sense.” She was about to brush it off when she noticed her friend’s discomfort. “What happened?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Nothing really…”

Should he tell her? Would she think it was improper of him? Would she think it was improper of Sigyn? Of course not, she was Darcy. She would only tease him.

“Loki, who? What happened?”

He cleared his throat, “Ah, Sigyn…”

Darcy wiggled her eyebrows. “Oh yeah? Sigyn, huh?”

He nodded once. “Ah...yes.”


“Um… she... well…” he straightened his posture. “She granted me a sign of her affection.”

This seemed to excite Darcy to the point of silliness. “She kissed you, didn’t she?” she took his silence as a yes. “Ooohh! Loki and Sigyn sitting in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Loki folded his arms across his chest, “That is childish.”

Darcy didn’t seem to care. “You looooooove her!”

“Darcy…”

“Looooove is in the aiiiiir!”

“Darcy!”

“Ooo, I’m Loki, and I’m in loooove with Sigyn!”

“I do not sound like that.”

Amused by her own jests, Darcy was reduced to a ball of repressed laughter on the bed, kicking her legs in happiness. “Did she kiss you on the lips?”

Loki turned away so she would not see his embarrassment. “No. It was on the cheek.”

She seemed disappointed. “Aw, that’s no fun. I was going to make more jokes.” She sighed, and then a smile stretched on her face. “You still loooove her!”
“Agh!”

“First comes love, then comes marriage, then come a baby in a baby carriage!” Darcy sang, standing on her bed.

Loki nearly fainted. “Darcy, you are being absurd. I believe it was only a simple sign of sympathy.”

She laughed, Jörmungandr mouthing her chin. She pet his head. “You guys would have the cutest kids.”

“Oh gods…”

“They would all be really pretty and tall. One would have blue eyes and black hair and another could have green eyes and blonde hair and you could name one of them after me!” Darcy sighed. “I think I’ll name my kids Astrid and Surtur. But I have to be married and then I have to kiss someone and then I’ll get pregnant.”

Loki just stared at her. Would she truly name one of her children after the King that had nearly had her killed? And did she truly believe that kissing would impregnate her? “I do not think that is how it works Darcy.”

“Of course it is! That’s how it happens in all the movies! People kiss and then sometimes they take their clothes off. I don’t know why though. I mean, I guess some people like to sleep naked. I tried it once, but I didn’t like it.” Darcy rambled, pausing to tap her chin in consideration of sleeping in the nude.

Loki could not believe he was having this conversation. “Darcy…that is not how it happens.”

She smirked, “Loki, I’m eleven. I know how babies are made.”

He swallowed dryly, slowly sitting next to Darcy on the side of her bed. “Darcy, I’m going to explain something to you. Alright?”

Five minutes later, Darcy had the most disgusted look on her face. “Ew! That can’t be how it works!”

“I assure you, that is how.”

“But…but…no!”

“Yes.”

“Eugh!” she wrung out her hands, “I’m never having kids! Ever! I’m going to get married to a girl; that way I never have to do that!” Darcy complained into her pillow.

Loki looked down at her incredulously. “Darcy…” he considered telling her of what he had learned from an…interesting (yes that’s the word for it, interesting)…book Fandral had showed him once. The gift had been a joke of sorts. Loki had no doubt Fandral had read it himself and only given it to Loki to make him uncomfortable. It did not embarrass him, Fandral failed in that regard. Yet the book lacked any kind of plot or storyline, so he did not finish reading it. However, he did learn a great deal from what he did read. “Never mind.”

Darcy sat up, as if coming to a sudden realization. “Wait, I was a baby once!”
“Obviously.”

“That means my mom and dad…eugh!” she collapsed into her sheets again, burying her face in Fenrir’s side. “My life is a lie.”

Loki found her reaction rather endearing. He had not gone through such theatrics when he read about it. In fact, he remembered it being no different to him than reading about common plants on Asgard. It was handy information, possibly to be used later. Darcy seemed to be having a much harder time.

“Wait, my parents had two kids! Oh no…they did it twice!”

Loki let his head fall into his hands as the truth dawned on Darcy. She went through every type of animal she knew, then through most of the people she knew, before calming down. “That is weird.”

“Darcy, it is the way of life.”

“It’s still weird.”

“If you say so.”

She tapped her chin. “I don’t get it.”

Loki had taken out his journal and was now reading through his notes today. “What’s not to get?”

“Some animals lay eggs! But human babies are born live.” She explained her confusion.

Loki snapped his journal shut, “I will get you a book. I cannot explain all this to you.”

“Why?”

“Because I do not want to explain it to you.”

“Okay, fine.” She agreed, falling back onto her bed, making a space for him between her and a now playing Jörmungandr and Fenrir. “Tell me about what you’ve been doing! I’ve only been getting detentions and Christmas happened and I had to go to church with my grandma. I got you a Christmas present though! You can see it tomorrow. But come on! Tell me.”

Loki waved a hand to magic himself into his nightwear, telling Darcy about the new political happenings in Yggdrasil. She read his journal at the same time, catching up on what she’d missed. “So you haven’t found anything on why you got burnt on Muspelheim?”

“No. It is most confusing.” He said, rubbing his eyes.

Darcy shut the book, rolling onto her belly, yawning widely. “Well, I’m really tired. My mom has to work tomorrow because she got a promotion at work, so they pay her more money and she has to go on planes and stuff.” She sighed, snuggling into her pillow. “We can do something tomorrow.”

“Do you have school?”

“No…it’s a Saturday.”

“Then I have a surprise for you tomorrow.”
Her small shoulders shook with a tired giggle. “I can’t wait.”

“Good night, Darcy.”

“G’night Loki.”

Chapter End Notes

So, there I was, sitting by my lonesome, when I noticed the number of kudos I had. And let me just say, HOLY MOTHER OF MISCHIEF! This little cute fic I had thought up during the late hours of the night has taken off with 330 kudos! I'm so happy!

*hem* Okay, I have my cool back now.

Aaaanyways, I think I should point out a Monty Python reference. When Loki gets cut he says "Tis but a scratch." The black knight scene is, like, one of my favorite parts of The Holy Grail.

Something I feel that is very important I point out is Loki's anxiety. He's young still, but I'm writing him to be a really anxious kid. He worries about Darcy, he's a perfectionist, and he wants to make those he loves happy, and he tries his best at everything he does. I want to just say, for all plot intended purposes, that according to this fic, Loki has been this way his entire life and no one really notices it. They just sort of assume he's overly studious when really, he has unresolved anxiety issues. That is important. It kinda gets seen in this chapter, I'm just pointing it out.

Well, I think that's all for now folks! I thoroughly enjoy receiving and replying to comments, so if you would like to review, please do so. I'm not opposed to kudos or bookmarks either. ;) Thank you so much all of you lovely humans!
Frank Doesn't Like Beards

Chapter Summary

Frank and Fenrir have breakfast. Darcy learns to fight. Odin is confused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki would not say he thoroughly enjoyed sleeping next to Darcy. It would not have been so bad if Fenrir and Jörmungandr weren’t also curled up on top of the covers.

The Infinite Serpent had become a bit of a bed hog as of late, and Loki often found himself battling Jörmungandr in the night for his pillows.

Now, in Darcy’s bed, he endured Fenrir’s dreams, which must have involved lots of running, Jörmungandr’s use of Loki’s pillow, and Darcy’s wiggling habits. He had thought that perhaps she would stop moving after she went to sleep. Quite the contrary; she moved more.

At times, she would wrap herself so closely around him that he feared suffocation, and other times, she would kick and flail in an attempt to conquer the bed with her limbs. Needless to say, Loki slept restlessly that night and did not want to move when Darcy poked him awake at seven in the morning.

“Loki. Loki get up.”

“…no…”

“Loki, c’mon, my mom just left and my dad should be home at lunchtime. Darius is here, though. Do you want breakfast?” she asked, shaking his shoulder.

He groaned, snuggling further into the covers, unwilling to leave them for at least another hour. He could deal with hunger later. Darcy, obviously, could not. “Loki, you’re really boring in the morning. You had all night to sleep.”

He groaned louder.

A wet tongue lapped at his ear and he begrudgingly pulled himself from Darcy’s bed, staring at her irritably. Darcy only stared at him with a contemplative look on her face. “Huh.”

“What?” he asked her, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

She giggled, running her hand over his head. “Your hair is messy.”

“I do not think I care. Are we eating now, or would you also like me to go fight a war before breakfast?” He asked, nearly collapsing back on the pillows.

Darcy sighed. “Don’t be so dramatic, jeez. You slept seven hours, what more could you want? Come on Frank, my mom bought hot dogs yesterday.”
He and Fenrir were down the stairs before Loki could utter his next complaint. “You know, it is very hard to sleep when a small girl is using your body as, what do Midgardians call it? A hitting sack?”

“A punching bag.” Darcy clarified cheerily, leading them down the stairs

“Right. That.” He stopped talking once they were in the kitchen as Darcy opened the refrigerator to pull out a rather large pack of hot dogs, she opened the bag and set it on the counter.

“I’m just going to get a fork so I can put them on a plate and heat it…Frank!” she leapt in surprise to see their slithery friend swallow the entire pack of processed meat sticks.

Fenrir whined unhappily until Jörmungandr made a few hacking sounds, coughing and producing a couple bits of regurgitated hot dog. Fenrir ate the spit-up happily.

“Gross,” Darcy said. “Go do that somewhere else.”

Loki chuckled, opening the fridge and pulling out the jug of milk while Darcy got the bowls and spoons. He reached up to the high cupboard to retrieve the Fruit Loops and Darcy poured them their respective portions, Loki’s considerably larger than her own. They sat down together to eat, Darcy telling him about soccer. She complained about how pointless a game it was, but he could tell she had come to like the sport.

After Loki had woken up enough to eat properly, he remembered his plans for their day. “Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“I do not celebrate this holiday of yours, Christmas, however, I believe it is customary to give friends gifts at this time, correct?”

Darcy nodded, slapping her palm to her forehead. “I got you something!”

“I have something for you as well. Though, it is more of a…well…I suppose I must ask you first.” Loki trailed off, waiting for her to give him an encouraging nod.

“Would you like to learn to fight?” he asked, setting down his spoon next to the empty bowl.

Darcy nearly fell off of her stool with how high her small form bounced into the air. “Would I?!?”

“I’ll take that as a yes?”

She waved her spoon around, spots of milk flying into her hair. “You mean like swords and armor and that stuff you do?!”

“That is exactly what I mean.” Loki assured and this time, Darcy did fall off her stool.

He quickly leapt from his own seat to make sure she was okay. “Darcy?”

She jumped up, her smile overtaking her face. “Come on! Let’s go! This is going to be—“

Her exclamatory declaration was cut short by a boy’s voice and thundering footsteps coming down the stairs. “Darcy stop yelling all the time! How many times do I have to tell you to shut the hell up?”

Quickly, Loki cast a spell to turn himself invisible as a tall, lanky boy walked into the room. Loki’s first thought was that he should ask Thor to beat this boy until he was nothing but bloody pulp for
what he said to Darcy. He then realized that this was Darius, Darcy’s older brother, whom he had never seen before.

Darius looked thoroughly irritated with his younger sister. “Look, Mom wanted me to babysit you until Dad gets home, which means you have to do what I say. So, shut. Up.”

Darcy lifted her chin defiantly, approaching her brother to poke him in the belly, “You shut up! I’m allowed to talk all I want! You’re only mad because Mom said you couldn’t go see your girlfriend!”

Both annoyed and angered, Darius pushed his sister away. “Shut up the fuck up, Darcy!”

Loki gasped at his language. Perhaps things were different on Midgard, but on Asgard, no one said that. It would be most improper, and to say it to a lady…? Unthinkable.

Darius must not have thought that because he proceeded to the refrigerator and pulled out what looked to be a tub of cold tomato sauce and a spoon.

“That’s gross.” Darcy commented.

“You’re gross.” He retorted.

“Your face is gross.” She replied and Loki did not think this was all true. Darius did not have the most appealing face, but he was not gross. Although, if he continued eating tomato sauce with a spoon, Loki would be tempted to agree with her.

He groaned. “Don’t you have something to do today? A room to play in? Something that doesn’t involve watching me eat breakfast?”


“Get lost Darcy.” He grumbled and Loki almost wished he would try to make Darcy do something she didn’t want to do. She may be helpless against a Fire Giant, but something told him Darius Lewis was no match for his younger sister.

“Make me.” She teased, giggling as she went to the counter to retrieve their bowls and put them in a cleansing machine called a ‘dishwasher’.

Darius raised his brows at her and Loki saw the general aggravation he had against his sister dissolve. In the next second, he had a laughing Darcy against his chest and she was...screaming... no, she was laughing. His fingers moved over her ribcage and Darcy lifted her feet off the ground, face red. “Uncle! Uncle!”

Darius smiled, holding her still. “Are you sure?”

“Yes! Darius, come on!” she laughed breathlessly.

He let her down and Loki moved to follow Darcy as she began running upstairs when something caught his eye. Jörmungandr and Fenrir had their heads in the bowl of sauce. Unfortunately, Darius chose at that moment to turn around.

“Oh MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT AHAAAAH!” he screamed and, without wasting a second, Loki reached over to clamp his hands over Darius’ mouth, afraid he would wake up the entire neighborhood. Before Darius could know his silencer, Loki cast a spell to put him to sleep. He hated to set a trend with Darcy’s family, but giant snakes didn’t tend to go down well with
those who did not spend their nights with one in their bed.

Darius immediately collapsed and Loki caught him under the arms, surprised at how light he was; heavier than Darcy but not by much. Loki had never been strong, but Midgardians all seemed so fragile.

He let Darius’ body slump onto the ground and Darcy sighed deeply. “Huh. Well, do you think he’ll remember it?”

Loki shrugged. “Perhaps he will think it’s a dream.”

“Yeah. Probably.” Darcy shook her head at her brother. “Anyways, I’m going to get dressed and then we can go! Oh, and I need to give you your Christmas present.”

Thirty minutes later, Darcy was showered, dressed, and sitting in front of Loki on her bed while he knotted her hair into a bun like Sif’s when she practiced. Darcy ran to the mirror and smiled; her light blue shirt sleeves were pushed up to her elbows. “Woah! I love it! Hold on, let me get your thing.”

He sat back on her pillows, watching as Darcy took out a few books from a lower shelf and uncovered from behind them, a small cellular device. “So, my family got new cell phones because apparently I need a cell phone too. But, I don’t know if phones work on other realms. They would probably have really bad signal or something. Anyways, I know you really like technology and you like taking apart my stuff. So I figured, you might like to take this apart.”

Loki accepted the phone, turning it in his hands. Darcy truly knew him well. A cellular phone device! As fascinating as the universe was, his interests were captured by the finer points of Midgardian technology. Their ability to view things on such a microscopic and technical scale was enchanting. Loki knew it was not as efficient to create things in such a mundane way, but he somehow felt as though having a broader understanding of it would help him breech some magical barrier.

“Darcy…I…you know me too well.”

“You like it?” she asked, kneeling next to him, her wide eyes looking even wider because of her tied back hair.

“Very much.” He assured, already trying to figure out how to get it open. He stopped himself, storing it in his coat pocket. “I shall look over it later then explain to you how it works. Thank you Darcy.”

She grinned, rubbing Fenrir behind his ears. “You’re welcome.” She bit her bottom lip, shifting from one foot to another, like there was something she’d really like to say. “So…about the fighting thing?”

Loki’s brow creased. What if she did not desire to learn? It would be a terrible present if she did not wish to learn. How would she defend herself if she did not? How would he defend them?

“Darcy…”

“Will I get my own sword? Or am I going to fight with a hammer? Or daggers, like you? Or a mace, like Hogun? Or an axe? Do you think I could use an axe?” Darcy asked excitedly.

He relaxed, pulling himself off Darcy’s bed and straightening his armor. “I shall explain on Asgard, yes?”
“Awesome!” She agreed, roughly throwing herself under the bed. “Come on!” her muffled voice demanded of him.

Loki happily complied, he and Jörmungandr following her under. In no time, they were sitting in the cave, the light of a bright Asgardian morning pouring in.

Darcy’s mouth was going at a thousand words per minute, debating if she would be able to use her new skills at school. Hel was waiting in the field, her bones clicking together as she stood. Loki walked over to pet her mane. “You do not have to stay Hel. I will call you when I intend to go home.”

She whinnied, nuzzling the young prince’s hair with her nose. He watched her prance off into the forest, entranced as she turned around the side of a tree, disappearing into nothing. It was so mesmerizing that he had not noticed Darcy had stopped talking. “How does she do it?”

Loki shook his head. “I do not know. Hel is special.”

“Well, she is half skeleton.” Darcy pointed out obviously.

“Yes.” He agreed walking around to make sure their area was spacious enough. “But it is more than that. When I attempted to heal Hel, I killed her. She is, quite literally, half dead. She is bound to Helheim by death, yet she walks amongst the living.”

“Helheim is where all the dead people go, right?” Darcy asked, trailing closely behind him, her voice heavy with curiosity.

“It is.”

“Then I don’t get it,” Darcy countered, her tone edging along the lines of a potential challenge. “How can you know she goes to Helheim? What if she goes to, like, Hawaii or something?”

Loki drew a blank. What Darcy offered was most certainly worthy of consideration. He believed Hel traveled to Helheim because his mother told him. Why did his mother believe that? Did he ever ask Hel? His mother claimed Hel went to Nilfheim, the province of Helheim that held the dishonorable dead. But he had never asked, never checked.

Darcy kept asking questions he had no answers to. “How do you know she’s half dead? What if all her meat and guts just fell off and she has magic horse powers? How do you know that the dead people go to Helheim, anyways?”

Loki felt like his mind had been flattened and was working double time to regain its full shape. He answered her last question with another. “How do you mean?”

Darcy tapped her chin, thoughtfully kicking the dirt. “Well, has anyone ever been to Helheim?”

“There are times…well…legends, I suppose, of men that have taken the bifrost there. But none have returned.” Loki said carefully, quickly trying to remember everything he had ever been taught.

“I wanna go.” Darcy stated matter-of-factly.

Loki could not answer immediately.

Helheim, as far as he had been led to believe, was the land of the dead. Going there was suicide; no one considered it because the mere thought of traveling to Helheim was unheard of unless it was
part of some story you told your children at night. But Darcy’s musings had caught him off guard. It would be easier if she had questioned life. He knew plenty about that.

Yet, she asked of death, and of that no one knew but the dead…the dead who he now queried the existence of.

“I…I do not know. I will do research. But Darcy…I have no idea if we can go.” He said slowly, trying to organize his thoughts. “I will look into it. But this is…this is what Asgardians have believed for…well since forever really.”

Darcy seemed to find this interesting, watching as Jörmungandr and Fenrir chased each other around small bushes and ferns. “Well, when my grandma makes me go to church, we learn about God and how people go to heaven when they die. Unless you’re bad, then you go to hell. But, I think they’re weird. None of them have ever been to heaven, so how do they know?”

Loki massaged his temples. “We must look further into this later. I am intrigued. But for now, you must learn to fight.”

The short Midgardian’s face split into a grin. “What am I going to fight with? Can I fight like you? You’re a great fighter!”

His heart thudded a little harder at those words and he had a strong desire to laugh. No one had ever called him an apt fighter before. Many had even claimed he would be incapable in a real battle. He feared that may be true. “Well, for now, let’s just say, I am a better fighter than you. I was thinking you could start with a sword. The form is easiest to wield for someone of little strength. Not saying that you are weak, Darcy…” he corrected himself quickly, “It’s only that you are small and Midgardians, I’ve noticed, do not have the endurance of Asgardians.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’m the weakest person on my soccer team. I can’t kick as hard as everyone else. It kinda sucks.”

He empathized with that sentiment. “Yes. So, sword it is. A one handed short sword.” He said, carefully planning out the kind of weapon she would need. It could not be too heavy or too long. Darcy had not and would not have years to develop the dexterity that he had accomplished with daggers. She needed a light weapon with enough reach to attack when needed.

Focusing his energy, he thought through the series of words and magical rules that went into creating a spell to conjure Darcy a sword from his imagination. He was pleased to find it had not drained him of energy as it once would have. He handed the new sword to her and she stared in awe, holding it so light glinted off the flat of the blade.

The blade itself was silver but the pummel was gold, decorated with glowing ornate ivy leaves and vines. “Do I get a shield too?”

Loki examined Darcy’s arms. “I do not think that would be wise. Shields are heavy and require a certain amount of training if you are intending to use one as a proper shieldmaiden. I have never trained with a shield.”

“Heart thudded a little harder at those words and he had a strong desire to laugh. No one had ever called him an apt fighter before. Many had even claimed he would be incapable in a real battle. He feared that may be true. “Well, for now, let’s just say, I am a better fighter than you. I was thinking you could start with a sword. The form is easiest to wield for someone of little strength. Not saying that you are weak, Darcy…” he corrected himself quickly, “It’s only that you are small and Midgardians, I’ve noticed, do not have the endurance of Asgardians.”

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“What?” Darcy asked backing up and swishing her sword about in a fashion that had Loki more concerned for her safety than her enemies.

“Because,” he began, moving to stand behind her, guiding her fingers to their proper positions on the grip and adjusting her stance. “I like to move around. Shields make that difficult.”

“What if it’s a small shield? Like Sif’s?”
Loki shrugged, “Stand tall Darcy. You will tire easily if you slouch.” He instructed, pressing a hand to her lower back in order to straighten her posture. “They do not appeal to me. It is also quite difficult to fight around a shield. Blocking is almost purely defensive unless you have enough strength to bash someone with it. Fighting defensively with a sword would then be pointless. Besides, I would not feel comfortable teaching you shield etiquette since I have not trained with one myself.” He walked around her now gracefully poised body to lift her chin. “When engaged in combat, look at who you are fighting. Acknowledge how they move and what their weaknesses are. There is no better aid in battle than sight.”

She nodded once, her pouty lips determined. “What do I do with my other arm?”

“Use it for balance.” He suggested, correcting the position of her elbow and hand.

Darcy made a face and her shoulders slumped forwards minutely before Loki pushed them back. “I feel like I’m in ballet. My mom made me take ballet when I was little because she thought it would stop me from being clumsy.”

“Was it helpful?” Loki inquired, inspecting her posture once more.

Darcy shrugged, effectively breaking her stance. Thankfully, she recovered it. “I don’t know. I liked it but I wasn’t very good. And my mom said when I get older my boobs will be too big.”

Loki’s hands froze on Darcy’s shoulders. What a strange word. It couldn’t possibly mean…

“I think she’s wrong. Just because she has them and my grandma has them, doesn’t mean I have them. Plus, I’m not having babies. So I don’t need boobs anyways.”

…breasts. Women on Asgard would never, ever, speak so lightly of that to a man.

Then again, Darcy was not Asgardian. Even so, the more he thought about it, the less shocked he was. They were just a part of her, were they not? It was no different than if he were to speak of muscles he may grow or magic he may develop. Quickly, he began their conversation again, hoping she would not notice his initial discomfort. “Is that the only reason you stopped dancing?”

“I guess,” she said, changing positions as he instructed her. “Hey, can I fight with two swords?”

“Two swords?”

She flailed her arms in terrible imitation of actual fighting positions. “Yeah! That way I could defend and attack and all that other stuff you were talking about.”

He considered her proposition. It wasn’t a horrible idea. She was right in that two swords would allow her to attack and defend more smoothly. However, she would also have to build up her strength. One does not fight well for long if they cannot hold up their own blade. “Alright.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’m serious. But—“

“This is going to be amazing! I’m going to be like…like…Darth Maul! Well…not really, I don’t want my swords to be together like that…I don’t know…Somebody really awesome with two swords and—“

“Darcy.”
“Yeah?” she gave him her attention once more and soon she caught on to his serious attitude and snapped back into place.

He conjured another sword and handed it to her, hilt first, then moved to stand behind her as his instructor had done when he learned to fight. He held her hands around the swords, keeping the grip in check, their bodies lined up so she was forced to stand with her back straight. In this new alignment, her bun touched his cheek, a few stray hairs tickling his nose.

“Can you put my initials on them?”

“Your initials?”

“Yeah. D.L.” she said, holding out the weapons in the worst form he’d ever seen. “That way they can be my swords.”

Abiding by her wishes, Loki cast a spell to engrave her initials in cursive onto the respective handles; ‘D’ on the left and ‘L’ on the right. “Is that well suited for the Lady Darcy?” he asked teasingly.

“Very much, Prince Loki.” She snorted out in another creative imitation of his accent.

Smiling, he stiffened their pose, urging her back into place.

“What’s the first rule of wielding a sword Darcy?” he asked. It was a rhetorical question. He didn’t expect her to know.

“You’ve got to stick them with the pointy end?” she asked hopefully and he laughed, almost breaking their perfect posture.

“That’s the essence of it. The thing to remember about dual wielding is that you must never let your guard down. Two blades means double the strength and you must be prepared at all times to both block…” he pulled their right arms forward in a simple defensive move. At the same time, he nudged her knee into a bent angle to support the expected blow the blade would have taken if she were sparring.

…and attack.” With his other hand, he quickly brought their arms forwards in one swift movement that, had their invisible opponent been weary, would have sliced his side.

Loki let go of her hands and backed away, magically bringing forth his own sword. Darcy watched with wide, awed eyes. “Woah. Hey, are we—“

He cut her off with a quick lash of his blade which she lifted her first sword to deflect, just in time. Secretly, Loki cast an enchantment to ensure the blades would not maim their opponents for the time being.

Darcy prepared herself for Loki’s next blow, managing to look both extremely nervous and hyper at the same time. He reminded himself that Darcy would not be able to take the brutal training process that his father had demanded he and Thor go through for years on end. He stuck to simple maneuvers, bringing his sword about to try and hit her legs or shoulder. Each time she blocked him, but did so quite weakly.

He noticed she was trying too hard to keep her posture intact and it was throwing off her fluidity. If he had been a master swordsman dueling her for his life, she would have died. This thought made Loki’s heart flutter uncomfortably and he hastily sought to encourage his friend.
“Shouldn’t I learn some things first? Like some awesome moves? Do Asgardians have weak spots? What if you stab me?” she squeaked, using both swords to counter his attack.

“Darcy, do you really think I could stab you?” He soothed, striking out again.

But her block was no different and one of her swords remained idle.

“Maybe.” She squeaked.

Instantly concerned, Loki thought of what he knew of Darcy Lewis. How did she learn? He thought to her bedroom. Whenever he explained something, she was moving. (Of course, she was Darcy. She didn’t stop moving.) She asked questions, she made sassy comments, and she always took the time to acknowledge what she was learning. She studied it.

“Darcy, look at me.” Loki demanded and her blue eyes found his. He could see her apprehension melt a bit. He spoke to her, raising his sword. “Notice how I move Darcy. There are no special attacks that will let you win instantly. Study me. Find what I cannot do and what I can do, discover my strengths and my weaknesses.”

With a certain tranquility in her eyes Loki usually only saw when she was reading, Darcy looked him up and down. “Okay.”

“What did you find?”

She grinned a bit. “Your hair is still messy.”

Loki smirked, quickly fixing his usually neat black locks. “Yours is always messy. What else besides the state of my hair?”

Her gaze studied him once again. “Well…you’re left handed…and your sword is longer than mine.”

He nodded approvingly, stepping forwards and flicking his sword at her ribs. She blocked it, not taking her eyes off him. “What else?” he encouraged.

“You don’t usually fight with a sword.” She pointed out.

“Yes.” He acknowledged, whipping around her so she had to spin to face him. “But you already know that.”

“Yeah.” She agreed, but he could see something stirring in her eyes. “But it means that you usually fight with a dagger. And you’re sneaky.”

“I am.” He said, aiming a quicker stab at her neck and this time, she sidestepped his attack.

“Which means if we fight…” she seemed to debate something before bringing her first sword forward to attack.

The swing was weak and rather slow, but her form was still in place. Without truly thinking, he dove under the blade, spinning on the toe of his boot to put his blade to the back of her neck. But Darcy’s blade was already there, shakily blocking his attack.

“…then you’ll try to be elusive.” She finished, their blades forming an ‘X’ between them. Their faces were so close that Loki could feel her tired breaths against his chin.

Something stronger than relief swept over him. “Very good.” He took note of her weakness. It was
almost terrifying. She had hardly been fighting and she was already worn out. He made a decision
to not use his full strength on her, for he did not want to harm her beyond repair. However, it was
crucial that she learn to fight things stronger than herself.

She smiled, breaking away from their stance. “Really? You mean it?”

Loki quirked a smile. “No. I was lying.”

“Liar. I did fabulous!” she said, dropping her swords. “My arms hurt.”

Loki stowed his own blades, indicating for Darcy to do the same with two leather and silver
sheaths he conjured for her. She did so while he spoke. “You did very well Darcy…”

She sat down in the grass, her skin dewed with sweat. “But…?”

He hesitated.

“Come on Loki. How am I supposed to get better if you don’t tell me what I did wrong?” she
asked, plucking a few blades of grass and knotting them together.

Loki pressed his lips together, still pacing the field as he chose his words wisely. He no sooner
wished to offend Darcy than he wished to be back on Muspelheim. “You are clever, Darcy. Yet,
you are Midgardian and you do not possess the physical strength of other races. It will make
fighting increasingly more difficult.”

Darcy cocked her head to the side. “Isn’t that racist?”

“No.” Loki said promptly, slightly hurt. Would Darcy really think it of him to feel that way about
her? She, his friend? “I have nothing against Midgardians, least of all you. But it is like the magic.
Aesir have abilities that Midgardians do not. Darcy, please do not think I meant any offense.”

Darcy smirked at him. “Loki, I was joking. I know you’re stronger than me. Besides, racism is
different on Earth. People judge other people because of the color of their skin, or sometimes if
you’re weird and mean and terrible…”

Loki was about to comment on the various historical facts he knew of Midgardian racism and how
ridiculous it was that they should slaughter themselves by the thousands over something as little as
skin color.

“…although, I guess Asgard is racist too.”

He turned to her, defensive. “We are not.”

“Yeah you are.” She insisted, plucking a few flowers from the earth and knotting them together.

“Darcy, I would think no lower of someone because of their color—“

“What about Jotunns?” she inquired curiously, a small smug smile on her lips and Loki thought
quickly in order to keep his composure.

“That is different. Jotunns are monsters.” He argued calmly.

Both her eyebrows shot up, expression skeptical. “Okay.”

“Okay?”
“Okay.”

“What do you mean, ‘okay’?”

She added another flower to her rope of vegetation. “Well, have you ever met a Frost Giant?”

Loki finger combed his hair back, “Darcy, you may be able to say that about Fire Giants, or Elves, or even Dark Elves, but you cannot say that about Frost Giants. There are books, countless books, written of their monstrous lives. Surely you’ve read a few of them?”

She looked sadly at her flowers which she now began adding small purple buds to. “Yeah. I guess. It just…okay.”

Loki could tell she had more thoughts on the subject and perhaps she would bring it up later, but for now, he decided to leave it as it was. Darcy thought so progressively he almost feared her next meeting with anyone from the palace. She may be arrested for treason.

He lay down next to her on the grass, briefly thinking to his duties on Asgard and wondering if the Allfather was greatly disappointed in him. He could be bettering himself for the good of Asgard and what was he doing? Teaching a mortal girl to fight?

He was a terrible prince, putting his own desires before the good of the kingdom. Nevertheless, he did not care. Asgard was in no dire need of his attention right now and perhaps Darcy’s survival would be of some benefit to them.

Perhaps—

“Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

She sat up and gestured for him to do the same. Gingerly, she placed the ring of flowers she had bound together on his head while she talked. “I’ve been reading a lot of those books, right? To figure out what happened to you on Muspelheim. Have you found anything?”

“No,” he admitted glumly. “It is worrisome.”

“Yeah.” She replied, adjusting his crown of flowers. He smirked at her and she giggled. “Well, I did find some things.” She tapped her chin pensively, “You’re not secretly disguised as a Frost Giant, are you?”

Loki rolled his eyes, moving the flowers onto her head. “Yes. Of course. The Allfather stole me away from Jotunheim when I was a child to raise me as one of his own.”

She sniggered. “Okay, okay. I was just kidding.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, watching as Fenrir and Jörmungandr played. Although, their playing looked significantly similar to the training Darcy and Loki had just been through. Jörmungandr was swiveling circles around his doggy friend, and occasionally Fenrir would snap out and take Jörmungandr’s tail in his maw. The snake would respond in turn by putting his mouth on Fenrir’s tail and the two would run/slither around in circles till they couldn’t see straight any longer.

Darcy laughed at them, standing back up, “Can we try again? I want to get really good at this. That way, the next time I have to fight someone, I won’t have to forfeit.”
Loki nodded, getting to his feet and brandishing his sword. “Very well. I will teach you what I can. But you must promise me something. A few things actually.”

“Okay.” She agreed taking out one of her swords.

“Promise me you will work on building your strength. It will be helpful for you to have endurance.” He said in a very princely manor.

“You mean you actually want me to do the push ups in gym class?” she groaned.

“Yes.” Loki smiled, straightening her flower crown, thinking that she looked very much like a princess. “And another thing…” he began more seriously.

“Yeah?”

“Promise me you will never use your strength to hurt someone who is not threatening your life.” He commanded, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She nodded vigorously. “I promise. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Thank you.” He said, backing away and holding up his sword. “Now, onto the swords-woman’s positioning…”

They trained for hours without sparring. Instead, Loki taught Darcy tricks he’d learned about balance and maximizing the force of a blow while minimizing the exertion to make the hit. She took well to the theory of the lessons and her mind was most adept in the concept of battle. However, her body was not and this worried him.

He hoped that if he taught her all he could about knowing your opponent and the style of their armor and the class of their weapon then she might be able to work against her weak mortal form in favoring intelligence. If only she had magic. It would make her situation so much easier.

Finally, when Darcy was drenched in sweat and her bun had finally come undone, he instructed her to lower her blade.

“I think that is all for today, Darcy.” He said and she dropped her arm from the position she had been standing in for the past ten minutes, repeating a countering technique that would both defend and injure if done properly.

“Oh good.” She said and collapsed in the grass. “Loki?”

He bent down next to her, fawning over her panting form. “Yes Darcy?”

“Can we do this again tomorrow?”

He laughed at her silliness. “Darcy, you will not be able to get out of bed tomorrow.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, not bothering to move her limbs as he lay down beside her, thinking of their discussion about Helheim. Could they travel there? Would it mean death? He was so curious, but he unsure if he could take such a chance... as the Midgardian saying went, 'curiosity killed the cat'.

He sighed, watching Darcy pet a snoozing Fenrir and receive cheek licks from Jörmungandr.

No matter her evident mortality, Loki admired Darcy Lewis. Though born Midgardian, she bore the aptitude for the life of an Asgardian. If Darcy could begin the undoing of a thousand year old
belief of Asgardians in five minutes...well...he could only imagine what she could do in five thousand years.

He cursed himself. How could he think that? She was to die before his life was half over! He needed to find some way...some means to make her impervious to Midgardian ailment and age. Someone of such intelligence, someone who could understand the world in so little time, someone who meant so much to him and made him feel...

Feel what? Like he belonged someplace? Like he was someone of importance?

He didn’t know. He only knew that of all things he desired to see, the corpse of his Midgardian friend was not one of them.

“I need to go back home soon.” She sighed, making no attempt to get up.

“Yes.” He agreed.

They both stayed laying in the grass as a light breeze drifted past.

“Hey Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

“Will you carry me? I don’t know if my legs work anymore.”

They laughed loudly, chortling over their own uncontrollable hysterias until Darcy was sure of her need to return home.

And Loki carried her there.

***

“Prince Loki, the Allfather requires your presence.”

Loki nearly groaned into his pillow.

When he returned from Darcy’s Loki found that he could hardly keep his eyes open and decided to take to his chambers for a short rest before getting on with his duties for the day.

Apparently the rest of Asgard had other plans for no sooner had he laid down than a messenger appeared at his door with a message.

Suppressing a yawn, Loki stood, smoothing back his hair. “Very well.” He said, Jörmungandr curling around his shoulders as he walked out into the hall. “Do you know what is it he requires of me?”

The messenger shook his head, “No, Your Highness.”

Loki pressed his lips together, suddenly concerned. “Thank you. You may go.”

“He awaits you in his study.” The messenger bowed rigidly then quickly walked away.

Anxiously, Loki hurried in the direction of the Allfather’s chambers. What had he done now? Was it the fighting? Had he neglected too many of his duties? It was most definitely the fighting. He had not been doing his duty to Asgard and his father was going to strip him of his crown.
He approached the majestic golden doors to Odin’s personal study with the posture of a prince. He had not been removed of his title yet. He would wear it with pride while it was still his to bear. The guards framing the entryway opened the doors for him and he stepped inside.

Of all the workspaces in the palace Loki admired, the Allfather’s study ranked the first. The walls gleamed gold and the windows behind lead out onto the loveliest view in all of Asgard save the one in his room. There were limitless shelves lining the walls and Loki could imagine them filled with books of his choosing, all at his fingertips exactly when he needed them.

Though, at the moment, he could not quite focus on the beauty of Odin’s workspace. He was far too distracted by the Allfather’s piercing gaze.

“Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, do you know why you are here?” he asked shortly and Loki could not avoid the scrutiny of his father’s glare. It was almost painful to meet his eye. But he did because he was a prince and princes did not shy away from intimidating looks.

Loki attempted to keep his expression detached. “Father, I will make plans with Thor to remedy my mistakes from yesterday. I swear—“

Odin rubbed his brow, face wrinkling in some flash of turmoil Loki had not seen before. “It was not your fighting, Loki.” His gaze sharpened and he sat up. “Do you truly not know?”

Loki shook his head uncertainly. What had his father found out about? Was it Darcy? Or…Muspelheim. Oh gods, Surtur had declared war on Asgard! No…there would be more immediate—

“Today, I received notification from King Surtur of Muspelheim that he wishes to create an alliance with Asgard.”

He had not been expecting that one. “An alliance?”

“Yes Loki, an alliance.” Odin repeated, standing up and moving to look out the window at the setting sun.

He forced himself to remain perfectly still. “What does this alliance entail?”

“That should either of our realms enter a war, the other will be there to support them.” Odin answered shortly. “Of course, you know what an alliance between Asgard and Muspelheim means.”

Indeed he did know. The treaty between Muspelheim and Nidavellir that had been grounded for centuries would not easily break. Nidavellir has recently made a pact with Vanaheim. And historically, the Vanir and the dwarves did not typically get along. So the chances of that bond were weak. If a war came, it seemed Asgard would have a greater number of supporters. Of course, it would be an absurd notion for Vanaheim to declare war on Asgard now.

Now their only concern was taming those from Nornheim.

“We may be able to evade war.” Loki said, just loudly enough for Odin to hear.

The Allfather nodded slowly, not turning away from his window. “Indeed,” he muttered. “Do you have any idea, Loki, why the Fire Giants would propose such an agreement?”

Loki thought through what would bring Surtur to that decision. The eldjötnar did not hold appreciation for Asgard in the past. In fact, tensions had been high. There must have been a deciding factor...something must have changed their minds. And he could only think of one little
mortal girl.

“I have no idea.” He lied smoothly.

Odin sighed, retreating to his desk and lifting a piece of paper. “I had the scribes relay Surtur’s message. In it, he states, quite vaguely, that you have changed his mind. He claims he warned both you and your little friend that there would be ‘consequences’ to your actions.”

Consequences. Didn’t Darcy mention something about not hearing all of what the Fire King had said?

The Allfather was not quite finished. “He thanks you for you and your friend’s insurance in the survival of Muspelheim’s pride. He wanted you to know that the others have passed away.”

Loki felt as if something heavy had been dropped in his chest. Astrid had survived…it must have been the water…

Odin seemed passive and this terrified Loki. He could not have hoped to keep his entire life from the Allfather, could he? Of course not. “Surtur did not elaborate much further than that.”

“He did not seem to be one for elaboration when we met.” Loki recalled thinking of Muspelheim and that insufferable heat.

The Allfather only stared blankly. “Heimdall claims that he did not grant you passage to Muspelheim. Surtur did not mention as to how you got there. He did not mention who your friend was.”

After an agonizingly long silence, Loki spoke. “Perhaps he meant Jörmungandr?”

The snake responded to his name, slithering onto the Allfather’s desk and bringing himself nose to nose with the King. He seemed temporarily enamored with Odin’s white beard, putting his mouth on it for a curious cuddle before backing away in horror.

Loki resisted the temptation to jump out the window.

Thankfully, Odin did not smite him with Gungnir. Instead, he offered Jörmungandr a small stroke on his scaly spine. “You have made a pet of an Infinite Serpent and brought him to Muspelheim to ensure the survival of their pride?”

Loki inadvertently gulped, shrugging a teensy bit. “I suppose.”

The Allfather made a sound of gruff frustration. “I remember my Father had to scold me when I was your age for abandoning my responsibilities in favor of picking fights with those I could defeat and making, quite honestly, awful attempts at wooing your mother.”

Loki ducked his head so his slight grin could not be seen.

“And now,” Odin folded his hands, “I am thinking of a way to reprimand you for doing the impossible in evading a war.”

Loki relaxed his clenched fingers that had begun to shake at his sides. “I apologize, Father, for my elusive behavior.”

After a long moment, Odin spoke indifferently. “Do I wish to know how it happened?”

“I cannot say, Father.”
“No. I suppose, you cannot.” He sighed, standing up and brandishing Gungnir. “Go, Loki. Tonight there will be a feast commemorating this day. It shall be named in your honor.”

It was a clear dismissal, but Loki stayed a moment longer. “No.”

“No?”

Loki shook his head, thinking of the words he needed so he would not stumble over them like a child, “I believe it would be the best interest to Asgard if this feast celebrated an achievement of Asgard rather than honor an individual that helped to achieve it.”

“Is this modesty?”

The prince cursed the heat that crept up his neck. “There is a time and place for flaunting one’s own deeds. Mine, I do not think the court would take kindly to.”

Odin studied him for a moment longer, giving Jörmungandr one last stroke. “As you wish it.”

Bowing, Loki turned to leave, hardly believing his luck when Odin called back to him. “And Loki?”

“Yes?”

“I almost forgot,” he grinned a little, waving Surtur’s message at him. “King Surtur also wishes you and your friend to know that he is aware of the heat of a Midgardian summer and hopes that your friend found everything she desired from Muspelheim’s basements.”

Loki nearly toppled over from the blood that had suddenly rushed to his cheeks. Surely he had no excuse for this. “I—“

“Have a pleasant evening, Loki.” The Allfather said, returning to his paper, leaving the young Prince to bow and return his chambers in search of magic powerful enough to ward a mortal against the Allfather.

Chapter End Notes

Woah! Would you look at that?! Another chapter!
Alright, so some things I've gotta address here. I did use a Game of Thrones reference when Darcy says the first rule of sword fighting is to "stick them with the pointy end." I love that show. So much.

I'm trying to, as Darcy and Loki get older, stress the importance of Loki's role in Asgard. Something I felt wasn't prominent in the movies (it wasn't really necessary) was how Loki and Thor are princes and they have essential roles in what happens in Yggdrasil. They're just kids, but also important people throughout Yggdrasil.
Then there's Odin...
I have no idea what I'm feeling 'bout him right now. None. *sigh*
One last thing, I did have Darcy question religion in this chapter. I mean absolutely no offense to anyone's beliefs through this. I, as a fanfiction writer, respect whatever anyone chooses to believe and Darcy's curiosity is for all plot intended purposes. Her skepticism towards Helheim is necessary to the massive story I have concocted. Once again, I apologize if I offended anyone.

Thank you everyone for kudos, comments and bookmarks! They all make me so happy! I super appreciate all of them and would be thrilled if you wanna drop a comment!
Darcy's got friends. Loki's got a token. Frigga still knows everything.

“Lewis! Good Work! Good Work!”

Darcy grinned widely as she retreated to centerfield after scoring her second goal this practice. She had been learning to fight with swords for five months now and every time she got just a little better. Loki said her main problem was that she wasn’t very strong. At first, Darcy had no issue with this. She continued sparring in a way that would not require much physical strength.

But it didn’t last long. The moment she backed down or believed she was beating him, Loki would use magic or perform a move that was simply impossible for her to counter. That’s when she decided she was going to get stronger.

Darcy asked her mom about gaining muscle and regretted it almost immediately. Mrs. Lewis was an expert, or so she said, on healthy eating. She advised her daughter to a high protein, high vegetable diet and encouraged her to try harder at soccer.

Caught between her dislike for vegetables and her desire to be a better swordswoman, Darcy made the choice to do as her mother said. Ever since, Darcy had tried her best at soccer and occasionally ate her broccoli. (Mostly just to get more dessert.) She played offense, which Loki claimed she needed to work at more since she wielded two swords, and her coordination was becoming increasingly better.

Coach blew her whistle, calling the end of practice.

Legs sore from her strenuous activity, Darcy still managed to run to the benches to collect her bag while Coach spoke to the team.

“Summer break begins next week those of you who signed up for the soccer over the summer, remember that practice starts at eight in the morning every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.”

Darcy drank deeply from her water bottle, nonplussed. She had signed up for summer soccer practice, but the more time she spent at soccer, the less time she got to spend with Loki.

Loki. She was worried about him. The rebellion in Nornheim was threatening to be a bigger issue every day. The chances of a war with Vanaheim were quite low because of Asgard’s new alliance with Muspelheim. But if the Vanir got desperate and asked the Jotunns for help…

She was sure that Asgard was on the brink of a rebellion which, if not handled with absolute caution, could result in civil war. According to Loki, if there was a war of any sort, he was required to be in it because he was a Prince of Asgard and it was his duty to protect the Realm Eternal.

And there was no way that Darcy Lewis was letting Loki go off to war without her there to protect
him. That’s why she had to get good with her swords. He needed her there.

She sighed as she thought about him, sitting down on the grass next to one of the girls on her team named Grace. She was nice, had curly black hair and played defense. They also sat next to each other at lunch. “Nice shot, Darcy.”

“Thanks.” Darcy said, taking another gulp from her water bottle. “Are you doing soccer over the summer?”

Grace nodded, sitting up on her knees. “Yeah. My mom is making me. She says it’s better than TV. Are you doing it? Or are you going to go somewhere?”

Television. Darcy didn’t have a whole lot of time for watching shows like her classmates. Not that she saw anything wrong with them, but if she and Loki were ever going to travel again, she needed to be sure it was safe. That required a lot of reading, studying, and formulating equations that may or may not function properly. Smiling, Darcy fell back on the grass. “I think I might go on vacation with my friend.”

“That sounds fun! I went to Disneyland last summer with Ashley. It was really awesome.” Grace said, waving over Ashley Nelson. She was funny and had long carrot orange hair.

“I’m going to die if we have to run anymore! My feet hurt like crazy!” she complained, slumping in the grass next to Darcy.

They hummed in agreement, Darcy taking another big swig of water when she saw him.

Nick Benedict. 7th grader, going on 8th grade. The boys’ soccer teams’ left midfielder.

Darcy had sat next to him for her last semester. Ms. Cutter had gotten tired of Darcy falling asleep in class, so she moved her up to the 7th grade math class so she would be challenged in her studies. This did not stop Darcy from falling asleep during her teacher’s lessons.

Consequently, and completely on accident, Darcy’s head sometimes lolled off onto Nick’s desk and he would have to tap her shoulder to wake her up. When she was awake, they would talk and pass notes in class and, if he asked, Darcy would help him with what they were supposed to be learning.

That’s how she acted when they were alone, in class, with the subject of math to keep her on track. But at times like these before her mom came to get her from practice, she always said the wrong thing. The problem wasn’t that she liked him. She didn’t like him. She especially didn’t like-like him. That would be gross.

She was Darcy Lewis and Darcy Lewis did NOT like boys. Ew. Gross. Boys.

However, she found that when there were other people around while they were together, she would end up the most awkward conversationalist in all of Yggdrasil. Really, it was all Nick’s fault.

“Hey Darcy! And Grace and…Amy?” Nick questioned politely, sitting down across from the girls.

“Ashley.” The red-head corrected.

Darcy looked up at him and found herself searching for the words to say. But she was distracted by his smile. Was he smiling at her?

Quickly, she swallowed the water she realized she’d been holding in her cheeks for an
embarrassing amount of time. “Hi.”

Grace giggled next to her and Darcy had a strange urge to tackle her friend and shove her mouth full of grass.

Nick didn’t seem to care very much and flipped his bangs off his face. “Darcy can I get a ride home with you today? My mom is caught up at work.”

Darcy fought her tongue for words. “Uh, yeah. Sure.” She rapidly glanced between her two girlfriends, positively unsure of what to do. Grace was stifling giggles while Ashley was smiling openly at Nick.

“You’re a really great midfielder.” She commented with a flirty grin.

Darcy felt something inside her clench. She knew there were a lot of girls that wrote Nick’s name in their binders with little hearts around it. Ashley even said she had a crush on him. But Darcy was above fawning over boys. Boys. Nasty.

“Thanks. I’m going to do this over the summer. I love soccer.” He said cheerily and Darcy could help notice his charismatic nature. He really was a nice person.

“Me too. I love it.” Ashley said quickly and Darcy rolled her eyes.

Grace now couldn’t help but burst out into laughter and Ashley sent her friend a dirty look. Nick laughed a bit too, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah…anyways, Darcy what did you think of that last question on the math final? You probably got it right, but I’m pretty sure I failed it.”

Darcy shrugged, finally bringing her eyes to the boy in front of her. “Uh, yeah. It was okay. I mean, it’s just algebra. If you solved using the quadratic formula it should be okay. Really it’s just preparation for working with projectile motion, and is one of the basic fundamentals for every arithmetic calculation past trigonometry…. Darcy trailed off, taking in the blank stares from her friends. “I mean…yeah, it was okay I guess.”

Nick gave her a funny look then smiled. “Darcy, how do you even know all that? You sleep half the class and talk to me the other half.”

She played with the grass at her feet, “Uh, my friend taught me.”

Grace looked like she wanted to say something but there was a loud honk from the parking lot. Darcy glanced over her shoulder, relieved to see it was her mother. “Well, bye guys. See you tomorrow. Last week of school!”

Nick stood too and Darcy noticed he was tall, but not as tall as Loki. Loki was really tall. And he didn’t look as strong as Loki either. Loki always said he was not as strong as most Aesir, but Darcy thought he was lying. He had muscles. “So, I can get a ride with you? I think my mom called your mom. They work together.”

“Okay, I guess.” Darcy agreed again, picking up her water bottle and gym bag. Her heart did a flippy thing and she was suddenly concerned about the state of her hair. Loki had braided it last night, but it was probably messy from soccer.

Loki.

Oh no, Nick couldn’t come over! Loki was supposed to be there when she got home from school so they could practice on Asgard! Okay, she would just quickly tell Nick he couldn’t come over
and it would all be fine.

“Uh, Nick, I don’t know…”

“Nick!” her mother called from the car. “You’re coming back to our house, honey! Your mom is going to pick you up from there!”

Well, shoot.

***

Loki sat in his place at the conference table as someone announced the state of Asgard’s most recent domestic affairs and he silently scolded himself for wishing the man speaking would walk off the end of the Bifrost.

Every day for months he was either enduring meetings with the councils of Asgard, sparing with Thor, or studying and training with Darcy.

Ever so slowly, his skills in battle were becoming honed and he found that offensive fighting could be done if he focused his strength using a combination of both body and blade. If he could knock his opponent off his feet without stabbing them through first, he was at an advantage.

The council meetings had gotten increasingly more interesting since he was able to speak at them. Slowly, they were building up bonds with Yggdrasil, working hard to unite the Nine Realms and ensure foreign stability. However, there were still those (Thor) that held them back because of their (childish) insistence that they go to war.

Unfortunately, those efforts were not entirely futile and discussion of negotiation with Nornheim had somehow become less popular than rivaling them in battle. It was never good news to have tension within one’s own realm. Loki feared Asgard would not fare well from a rebellion.

Away from their opposing beliefs in strategy, Loki had found himself better acquainted with Thor than he’d ever been in the entirety of their lives. In all honesty, he still thought his brother lacked a great deal of common sense, but he had stopped being quite so rude to those around him. It was much easier for Loki to sit with him at meals without being chastised for his differences.

Of course, he did not say much, but perhaps that was because he did not have anything to say to Thor and his friends. Now, when he made an occasional interjection into their conversations, his comments were no longer taken with malice from Thor.

On the rare days that Loki spent in the library, doing research on whatever had sparked his fancy that day, he would receive a visit from Sigyn. Their conversations had become longer in length and somewhere along their line of brief communications, they had become friends. She would stop by and see him, or some days, she would be waiting for him at his table.

There, he would show her small bits of magic that made her eyes spark with awe and curiosity. Her face never revealed these emotions, but he enjoyed searching them out in her eyes like one would a long lost treasure.

In all this, his time with Darcy he treasured above all else.

They spent their time together looking for new mysteries to discover and researching the ones they already had. Their search for the tesseract was still a constant hobby. They had deduced that it was not on Muspelheim or Asgard. Loki had wanted to rule out Midgard as well, but Darcy insisted that they hadn’t checked anywhere on Midgard and they shouldn’t make that assumption yet. So, he
considered Midgard lightly.

As for their suggested trip to Helheim, Loki continued to object strongly. Darcy argued they had no proof anything bad would happen. Loki argued they had no proof anything bad wouldn’t happen. They were at an impasse and they kept it that way.

Darcy very desperately wanted to see Jotunheim and Loki shared her curiosity, however, it was dangerous and forbidden by the Allfather for any Aesir to set foot on that realm until the rift between the Asgardians and the Jotunns was mended. Instead, they planned a trip to Nidavellir. If they were caught in the land of the dwarves, they would most likely be welcomed as guests rather than prisoners.

This excursion had taken a hundred translations, millions of books, and several trips to Asgard, but finally, they had a pretty good idea about which portals led to where. It was painstakingly torturous work, but there was an exact science to portal locations and within a few months, they were reasonably prepared.

Nevertheless, he worried about Darcy constantly and had only found one solution to her mortality. Apples.

Golden ones to be precise. They were grown in the Asgardian wild lands where everyone but Odin and the orchard’s cultivator, Iðunn, were forbidden from entering. Those apples would grant immortality to their consumer and it was not uncommon for Asgardians nearing three thousand years of age to eat an apple. Loki did not know how exactly the fruit worked for he had never had the opportunity to study them.

No matter how they functioned, stealing one for Darcy was near impossible. He would either have to find the orchard and steal one, or beg the Allfather for permission to keep his friend alive. Neither option was appealing or completely possible. Which led him back to his first question: How would he keep Darcy alive?

It was a silly notion. Even the apples could not stop death. They could prevent aging, deterring fatigue and weakness, but they would not stop you from being killed.

Thor spoke loudly, bringing Loki’s attention back to the current situation.

“We cannot simply stand by while Nornheim threatens war on Vanaheim! We must act! Put them in their place!” he protested for the fourth time this meeting and Loki was tempted to steal Gungnir and smite his brother with it. Usually, he did not argue his brother directly; leaving the rest of the court to struggle with his arrogant sibling, but today was different. Today, he did not desire to watch them struggle. He only wished to leave and go see Darcy so they may continue their journey to Nidavellir.

Attacking Nornheim before they threatened the capital was a dangerous move and it would risk the lives of countless innocents.

He stood up from his chair to speak and everyone’s eyes came to him. That was one good thing about speaking rarely; everyone listened to you when you finally had something to say. He opened his mouth to state his point when a messenger burst into the room, his hair wild and messy. “My King, Odin Allfather, King of the Realm Eternal, there is a message from Nornheim.”

Odin glared at the boy grimly, gesturing for him to come forth and place the scroll into Odin’s hand. The Allfather opened it slowly, breaking the seal with ease and reading it as though it were a
tax report. Sighing, he set it in front of him. “Nornheim has threatened the capital with war.”

Dead silence filled the conference hall.

And then…

“We will meet their demand!”

“What an outrage!”

“Perhaps we could still negotiate.”

Thor’s voice sounded above everyone else’s. “Nornheim must pay!”

Loki pursed his lips, letting his eyes fall upon the swarm of squabbling nobles and Lords. Finally, he set his gaze on the Allfather, who looked as though nothing had changed. He surely should have been expecting this. It was only a matter of days, but this timing was terrible for his plans with Darcy.

He grimaced at the table, waiting for them to realize that he was still standing to speak. Eventually, the rest of the council members noticed and the noise settled down. Loki gave a quick nod of thanks before speaking. “War with Nornheim is not guaranteed. We may be able to avoid a civil war with negotiation.” He could feel Thor’s anger radiate in waves along with the boiling refutes of a few lords. “However,” Loki continued solemnly, “I think that the matter would be more definite if settled by battle.”

The council was silent as Loki sat down, all of them awaited the Allfather’s word.

On cue, Odin stood, his regal gold robes glimmering in the afternoon sun. “We have not sought this skirmish, and it will not end with a simple treaty or contract. The Norns desire blood for their imagined grievances.” He paused to cast a wary eye over the table, gaze resting eerily on Thor. “This time tomorrow, troops will leave for Nornheim.”

The council was dismissed, but Loki and Thor remained, awaiting the Allfather’s words. He looked to them severely. “Thor, Loki?”

“Yes, Father?” they chimed in unison.

He reached out, grasping each of their shoulders. “On the morrow, you will both be off to fight in your first battle. Hopefully, it will not last longer than a fortnight to settle this ordeal. Be warned, you may take your first lives. It is not an easy burden to bear.”

Loki tilted his chin in a slight nod while Thor lifted his proudly. “I will not let any man of Asgard die without honor, Father.”

Odin looked like he had several things he’d like to say to his eldest son, but he refrained, releasing the boys. “Go. Rest. Prepare yourselves. Tomorrow is not a day you shall soon forget.”

With that, they were dismissed and the boys walked slowly out of the conference hall, waiting for the doors to shut before allowing their true emotions to show.

“YES!”

“By the gods…”

“Loki…this is what we—“
“—you—“

“—have been waiting for! To fight! To have honor!”

Loki nearly drew blood for how hard he was biting his tongue. Battle? It had been made quite clear to him by everyone on Asgard that he was not cut out for war. If he were to die, what would Darcy do?

Oh, by the Norns, Darcy!

If he died she would find a way to Helheim to kill him again! She was really angry the last time he almost died. He could not leave her. He had promises of adventures to keep and a life to live.

He was a Prince of Asgard, hence, he knew how to wield a blade and he would not let the fate of his realm rest with a few bitter High Lords.

Thor grinned, ear to ear, clapping his brother on the shoulder. “Come now, Loki! You have grown, have you not? I dare say you and I are even the same height now! What have you to fear?! Death? A bit of blood? We have nothing to lose!”

Loki was used to his brother’s desires for conflict, he’d been all but worshiping Mjolnir since the day he got it. But this…this was nothing but bloodlust. He wished to have the blood of men on his hands, and for what reason? To prove himself a man? To have honor? Glory?

He did not fear death. He did not desire it, but when his time came, he would accept it. Yet, taking the lives of men, many of whom are only farmers or merchants, fighting with outdated weapons and armor their fathers had worn before them…he was not thrilled. Not in the least.

Unable to hide his disgust, Loki straightened his posture. “I have nothing to fear. I have everything to lose.”

“Loki—“

“Rest well, Brother. I will meet you by the longships in the morning.” He said with definiteness, turning away from Thor, Jörmungandr at his heels.

Furiously, Loki stalked away, veering into the library and forcefully shoving books into a saddlebag he would be taking with him when he went to Darcy’s. She would help him devise a strategy to assist in the battle that would take place. The capital would need to win before too much Asgardian blood was shed.

He would not fail his duties as a prince. He would save Asgard and defend it all by himself if need be. But he would not kill anyone. He refused to kill anyone. He—

“Prince Loki?”

The dark haired prince froze midstride, just as he had magicked away his bag. “Lady Sigyn.”

She was beautiful. Of course, Loki thought she looked magnificent no matter the day. Her hair was pinned back from her face, the almost white tresses skirting over her shoulders. “I heard about the message from Nornheim.”

“Has word spread so quickly?” he asked politely, barely containing his nerves. He needed to go settle this matter. He needed to plan and devise a method to insure the survival of as many men possible and he could not do so without Darcy.
Sigyn shook her head, turning away. “No… I was listening for it. You mentioned before that you were expecting a declaration from Nornheim any day.”

“I was.”

There was a short silence that seemed to stretch for days before the young lady spoke again. “I wish you the best of luck.”

“I—”

“And…” Sigyn continued, her cheeks pink as she played with something in her hands. Warily, she approached him. “I would like you to carry a token. My token, that is.”

Loki imagined that, had he not been wearing his armor, his heart would have hammered straight from his chest. A token? It was a sure sign of courtship if a man were to wear a possession of his lady’s into combat. That way, if he were to die, those who found his body would know who his heart belonged to.

“Lady Sigyn, I would be honored.” He said with as much sincerity as he could muster. Out of all the time he spent with her, he never would have imagined that she would hold such feelings of affection towards him. Why would she want him when she could have Fandral or Thor? They often spoke of her beauty and poise. Sure he was a prince, but only the second one. Why have him when she could have the eldest?

Whatever the reason, he did not wish to question his good fortune much longer. Sigyn blushed and from her hands procured a silver chain with a small, delicate key hanging off it. She reached around his neck to clasp the necklace. “This is the key to a box that holds everything dear to me. I keep it under my bed and this is the only key. Come back, and it will not be lost to me.”

Loki could feel the heat in his cheeks, but it was overcome by the softness in his heart. Did she truly have such faith in him that he would return? Her hands had long since clasped the necklace, but they lingered on the back of his neck and for the first time, he noticed how close they were.

“I promise, Sigyn, I will return it to you. Personally.” He clarified, suddenly unsure of what to do with his hands. Should he embrace her, as he does Darcy? Carefully, he placed a hand on her back, aware that she was taller than Darcy, and her cheek brushed over his when she tightened her arms around him.

She whispered softly, as if afraid she may be too loud. “I’ve never had a friend like you Loki.”

“A sorcerer?” he inquired, throat thick.

She drew away from their hug and there was moisture in her eyes. “No. You…care for me. Not as someone to court or to show. You may be the Prince of Lies, but Loki, no one has ever been more honest with me than you.”

It was the most forward thing she had ever said to him and Loki nearly took an arrow in his knee before his first fray. “I do care for you, Sigyn.” He said softly, staring down into her sharp blue eyes, diluted from their usual intensity by her tears.

Until this moment, Loki had not realized the tenderness he held in him for Lady Sigyn. Her cheeks shone in the orangey glow of the sun off the books. In their close proximity, Loki had no question of what to do next. If Sigyn were to give him a parting gift, he would give her one as well.

With her fingers resting on his shoulder and one of his palms at the small of her back, he lifted a
hand to her face, brushing a tear from one of her high cheekbones. With every means of delicacy imaginable, he tilted his head to brush Sigyn’s lips with his.

He backed away, looking down at her, checking to see if he had done something wrong or out of place. But there was only a pink hue to her cheeks and a warm glimmer in her eyes. “Return my Prince, or I shall miss that key.”

“Indeed.” He smiled, taking her hand and kissing that as well before turning on his heel and strutting away with new purpose. Now he truly did have everything to lose. Asgard needed him, and he would gladly do his part as prince. But now, he must also return for Sigyn. She needed him and he would not have her weep over his death.

Just as Loki reached the stables a thought occurred to him.

He had kissed a lady.

He brought a palm to his forehead, unbelieving. He frantically looked down at Jörmungandr. “I kissed a lady.” He said blatantly.

The snake looked up at him happily, the tip of his tail moving from side to side.

“Why do you look so enthused about this!? That was so very, very improper of me! How could I even…that was out of turn! We are not even courting! I am a mess, Jörmungandr! An absolute mess!”

“My dear, I do not believe you are well suited for war if it has not even started yet and you are going insane.” A light voice chided to him.

“Mother.” Loki turned on his heel, combing back his hair. “I…must admit I have done –“

“You have kissed the Lady Sigyn? After she gave you a token? Well, it only seems appropriate, does it not?” she said approaching her son with a grin on her pretty lips.

“You are not upset by my actions?” Loki inquired, brows coming together.

She chuckled, stroking the side of his face with a gentle hand. “No, Darling. I am not.”

“How did you find out so fast?”

Frigga gave a slight shrug. “She came to me this morning and asked if I thought it appropriate for her to grant you her token. I told her yes. And when my son is outside the palace, telling his pet snake about kissing a fair maiden he is not yet courting…well…forgive me for drawing conclusions.”

Loki quickly recovered from his initial shock. “There is nothing to forgive.”

She smiled easily, drawing him into a hug. “In case I do not see you tomorrow, I love you, Loki. You will do fine in battle.”

He returned her embrace, more tightly than he would have in the past. “I will return home Mother.”

“You will. I am sure of it.” She sighed. “Now, go on. You have matters that need tending to, do you not?”

Loki blinked blankly then remembered his purpose for being out by the stables. Darcy. “Right. Good day, Mother.”
With that, he strode away, Jörmungandr at his side and called for Hel.

They rode so fast, Loki feared he’d lost his hair to the wind by the time they reached the cave. “Hel, I will be back in the morning. It is essential that I plan tonight with Darcy. She will not be pleased we are missing out on her training, but we shall make do.” He assured his horse before wiggling into the cave and teleporting to Midgard.

There, he quickly climbed from under Darcy’s bed, dumping the books on her floor and rubbing an unphased Fenrir’s ears.

War.

There was a great deal to think about when planning for a war.

The general of the Asgardian’s elite army, the Einherjar, was typically assigned by the Allfather and accepted guidance from both the king and the princes. Loki was relying on the acceptance of his word to get them through this skirmish.

As horrific as it was, many of the men on Asgard were so anxious for a chance to prove themselves, the loss of men meant very little to them. They were willing to kill to have their name praised once during a toast at a celebratory feast.

The challenge of this war was not to win. The capital would strike out the Norns before the day was up. Of this he was sure.

However, winning and relenting was another thing.

Asgard had not fought a war since Odin’s feat with the Frost Giants. Because of this pitiful deprivation of violence, even after the generals will have forfeited and raised their flags, the men fighting will not be so eager to put down their weapons. Loki sought a strategy that would end the skirmish before the true heat of battle set in and more lives were lost. The greater the discrepancies in casualties between the provinces, the more difficult coming to terms on a peace treaty could be.

The solution to this, Loki hoped, would rest in the journals of famous war heroes. He should have thought better of that. Asgardian champions were always honored, not for their cunning in battle, but rather their strength and the collection of corpses at their feet.

Bitterly, Loki slammed shut a copy of his grandfather Bor’s journal. All it held was the best ways to defeat Dark Elves and a short guide on surviving the strength of the Kursed. It was interesting, and for a moment he was drawn to Bor’s musings on the Dark Elves’ weapons. Apparently, a stab from one could turn a man’s innards as dark as night, poisoning him from the inside out. Perhaps he should do more research on it.

Sighing, he buried his face in Fenrir’s shoulder, wishing Darcy was there to give him ideas.

No sooner had he wished it then Darcy slammed through her bedroom door, hair frazzled and knees stained green. Her eyes met his, and her frantic demeanor became downright panicked. “Loki! Hide! Quick!”

He turned him and Jörmungandr invisible just as a boy appeared in the doorway. He was taller than Darcy with a wide crooked smile and something that looked like mischief brewing in his eyes.

Loki would know, he was a Prince of such things. And because of this, he was positive there was only one male allowed to make mischief in Darcy’s room, and that was him.
OH MY GOD, WHAT WAS THAT?

Okay, so I know it's been a while. Oops. I would like to dedicate this chapter to my beta, esmejasper, because she moved and didn't have internet for two weeks and she still managed to get this shit done. She claims to owe you all "kittens or cupcakes or kitten cupcakes or something :)

Lol, okay. So, also, I'm going to explain my thinking of Asgard's war problems. In my head canon plot, Asgard, as a realm, is kind of a super big country that has ginormous provinces that have cities ruled by Lords and the province and bigger cities ruled by High Lords. This is going to make a whole lot more sense in the next few chapters.

Now, I know, that as tasertricks worshippers (see what I did there? with 'shippers'? haha) we hate it when Loki and Darcy are paired with people who are not each other. For now, let us try not to throw Sigyn off the bifrost with the though in mind that, one day, in this fic, tasertricks will be a thing and the world can sleep peacefully.

Thank you everyone for your patience and comments and kudos, I love reading the things you have to say to me including, but not limited to: compliments, praise, advice, requests, hate, passive aggressive messages, gibberish, ancient chitaurian, brain vomit, commentary on inner turmoil, and estranged gifs.

Thank you!
Frank Wears Armor

Chapter Summary

Idiot Boy is not amused. Loki can't deny Darcy anything. Sif is Sif. Hogun has a life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki was appalled.

Typically, he was not quite so jarred by such things as people entering Darcy’s room. But this was different. This was A Boy.

“It’s cool,” the Boy said, glancing around Darcy’s room. “Wow, you have a lot of books. No wonder you’re so smart.”

Smart. Loki scoffed, crossing his invisible arms. Darcy was a great deal more than smart. This Boy should use accurate vocabulary if he was to describe Darcy. He was an idiot. An Idiot Boy. Yes, that would be his name from now on: Idiot Boy. It had a pleasant ring to it.

She shrugged a bit and Loki did not think he ever saw Darcy look so flustered.

Oh gods. Darcy favored him!

He would goad her about it later. He could taste the revenge. It was quite sweet.

“I guess I’m a genius sometimes.” Darcy sniffed, sitting down on her bed and pulling off her cleats, giving Fenrir a pat on the head.

“Is that Fen? You talk about him a lot,” said Idiot Boy and Loki rolled his eyes. Surely Darcy could choose someone who was not so thick. Really. She needed someone who was intelligent who could keep up with her quick tongue. And someone who had a lot of patience and could tolerate question after question after question…

“Yeah. This is Fenrir. He’s a weirdo sometimes.” Darcy commented as Idiot Boy paced the room, admiring the stacks of textbooks that littered the floor and surfaces of Darcy’s preferred living space.

“Calculus? Physics? Biology? The Study of Psychology? Have you read all these?” he asked, eyes skirting the room.

Darcy stood, tracing her finger over the different quadrants of the room. “This corner is full of stuff I’ve read. That one is the stuff I reference when I need prior knowledge that I don’t have yet. And that quadrant is the stuff I haven’t read. I need that other corner for stuff that isn’t books.”

“Do you—“

“I read a lot. I don’t want to talk about it. Do you want to watch a movie or something? Or do you want to go outside? Or play monopoly? I don’t really care, just let’s not talk about the books. And
don’t read any of them! It’s dangerous.” She said, lifting her chin and Loki liked how her hair was flying free from her braid in places.

Obviously, this idiot boy Darcy fancied thought this was a joke. Really, he was not worthy of her. “Alright, Lewis, a movie is cool. Mind if I sit down?”

Darcy gestured to her bed. “Sure.”

He watched in bitter resentment as Idiot Boy sat on Loki’s side of the bed. Of course, it wasn’t really his side of the bed…it was Darcy’s bed…nonetheless, that was his side of Darcy’s bed and he did not appreciate some ridiculous mortal boy flirting with Darcy in that particular spot. He should flirt with her elsewhere. Somewhere more appropriate than her bed.

Loki could see it now as Darcy got out her DVD player and they began watching a movie called 300. The boy pet Fenrir and talked to her throughout the beginning of the film. Loki could hardly focus his attention on reading his books in the floor and Darcy kept sending nervous looks in his general direction.

“Nick, this is a terrible movie.” Darcy commented, “They’re all just killing each other.”

“Yeah. It’s a dude movie. People kill each other in dude movies. That’s how it goes.” He teased, elbowing her side.

Loki grimaced. He usually elbowed Darcy. Who was this Idiot Boy, to think that he could just… take his place? No! He would not!

Darcy shot a look at the closet and then back at the screen, a slight blush on her cheeks. “That’s stupid. It’s not just a boy movie. It’s a movie. You don’t have to put a gender on it.” She said, elbowing him back.

Idiot Boy grinned. “Well, do you want to do something else?”

“Like what? Your mom should be here any minute. We could…uh what are you doing?” she asked as the Idiot Boy took her hand.

He shut the DVD player, “I like you Darcy. I know you’re eleven and I’m twelve, but I still like you.”

“Oh…cool. You’re okay I guess.” She said, and Loki could sense her tease, but it was weak. Her discomfort was evident.

But Idiot Boy continued his terrible attempts at wooing her. “So…you wanna do something else?”

Darcy seemed to be in the midst of great indecision. Loki swore to himself, if Idiot Boy tried anything Darcy did not consent to, he would destroy him with every spell he knew.

“Yeah. We could—“

Loki swiftly looked away as Darcy’s words were cut off by Idiot Boy’s lips. Oh, By Odin’s Beard! This is impossible! Darcy was only eleven and she was kissing boys! And idiot boys at that! Should he attack him? Darcy didn’t look like she was enjoying it all that much. Or was she?

Loki sneaked a peek at the two and had the urge to laugh. Darcy’s eyes were wide open and glaring in his general direction with menace while Idiot Boy’s were squeezed shut. He cast a silencing spell on himself so he could release the hysterias that strained his chest as Darcy pushed the boy
“Dude what the heck?!” she exclaimed, standing up and dramatically making gagging noises. “You licked my mouth!”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, brushing his stupid blonde hair away from his face. Blonde hair? Did Darcy like blonde hair?

She made a face at the boy sitting on the edge of her bed. “You’re not just supposed to do that to people!”

“What?” Idiot Boy asked dully, “I thought you said you liked me too.”

“Yeah, but I don’t like you when you lick my tongue!” she emphasized, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Loki feared falling to the ground for how hard he was laughing. Perhaps he should not find such amusement in Idiot Boy’s discomfort and embarrassment. He must truly be terrible at kissing if this was Darcy’s reaction. She tended to be fairly honest with her feelings unlike Sigyn.

Unlike Sigyn…

He stopped laughing, thinking back to his kiss with her. What if he had been a terrible kisser? What if she hated it? He had walked away rather fast…had he missed the disgust? He did not know any proper technique for kissing women! What if he was as awful as this idiot boy whose cheeks now held semblance to the color of Thor’s cape?

“That’s how you kiss people!” he defended and Loki was convinced that this boy had not the slightest idea or experience with kissing people. Just to make matters worse for the Idiot Boy, Loki cast a quick, harmless spell that provoked some rather unpleasant itches in some hilariously inconvenient places. Under normal circumstances he would not stretch so low as to mess with Idiot Midgardian Boys. But this one deserved it. His idiocy far exceeded the rest.

“Well, why would you want to kiss me anyways? I mean, there are probably a lot better kissers. And don’t people usually kiss before they interact coitally? We aren’t even old enough to procreate! Well, you are. Male sperm development begins when you hit puberty. I’m guessing you have because you’re tall. But, everyone’s taller than me. But I can’t make babies yet! I haven’t started menstruating! Why would you even want to kiss me!?”

Loki’s knees buckled and his ribs were beginning to ache from laughter. Darcy’s logic was so very…Darcy. Perhaps she had not read the part in the book he gave her about the pleasures of intimacy.

Idiot Boy was squirming like his pants were on fire and Loki applauded himself. Now what would Darcy think of him? Hm? Certainly not that he was a blonde handsome person that she should let kiss her…in her room. Idiot Boy held up his hands, sweat a light sheen on his face. “Darcy, I don’t want to…do…that…. God, I just want to kiss you.”

“Yeah, but why?” she asked again, stomping her foot and crossing her arms like she was demanding he confess to some major crime.

“I don’t know! Because I like you! You’re smart! I thought it would be fun! I don’t know.” He said, looking up at the ceiling, his ears red. Loki admired how Idiot boy had not done anything about the itching. Perhaps he should make it a little less bearable. “I thought you could…like…be my girlfriend.”
Girlfriend.

What?

Darcy was too young to be anyone’s girlfriend. She was his friend and this Idiot Boy needed to get his facts straight. Loki waved his hand aggressively and watched smugly as Idiot Boy struggled to keep from scratching his entire body.

“Oh,” Darcy said, tapping her chin. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

They sat in silence for a few seconds, and Loki looked down at his book about the battle strategies of his Grandfather, Bor. In those days, he could have simply waved some magic on Midgard and he would be worshipped as a god. Alas, now it would cause civic unrest.

Idiot Boy’s hand twitched towards his most intense itch and Loki nearly sang with satisfaction.

“I guess we—“

“Nick! Your mother is here!” shouted Darcy’s mother from the main floor.

Immediately Darcy leapt up. “Oh, would you look at that. I’ll see you at practice, bye Benedict!” she said, pushing him from her room as quickly as possible, her cheeks flaming red.

Loki waited till Darcy slammed her door shut and pressed her back up against it to turn himself visible, a gloating look on his face. He decided to wait a few minutes to remove the spell from Idiot Boy.

“Don’t you dare say anything,” Darcy warned.

Too late.

“You love him.”

“Loki…”

“You are in love.”


“Darcy and Idiot Boy, sitting in a tree…”

“Loki! His name is Nick!”

“First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage,” he mocked her, sitting down in his rightful place on her bed.

“Agh!” Darcy screamed, flopping into her pillows. “That was so awkward!”

“Do you like-like him?” Loki asked airily, knowing full well he had a war to discuss. Teasing her was just so much more fun.

“Shut up,” she grumbled and Loki saw the back of her neck turn bright pink.

“You do! How quaint. Shall I have my helmet polished for the wedding now or later?”

“Loki, I’m going to kill you,” she sighed, sitting up at last. “I don’t like him. He’s my friend.”
“He desires courtship with you,” Loki pointed out with a smirk. “Your children would be adorable.”

“I don’t want to be his girlfriend. Ashley can be his girlfriend and he can lick her mouth. But not mine,” she stated, sitting back against her headboard. “He’s bad at math.”

Loki laughed and Darcy punched his arm, picking up one of the books he’d brought with him. “Are we studying battle strategies for a reason? How’s Nornheim?”

Immediately, he ceased his hysterias. “I have grave news, Darcy.”

“What?” she asked, turning to the first page of a rather thick leather bound book. “This looks interesting. And it’s written in—“

“Darcy, I am going to war,” he blurted out, hoping she acknowledged the depth of his words.

She raised her brows. “Huh. I’m not surprised. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morn—“

He stopped speaking. Did she say ‘we’? As in, the two of them?

“Morning, huh? We had better get working if we’re going to beat the Norns without killing off an entire province. Defeating all of them would not make the Lords happy and there would be even more unrest in Asgard—“

“Darcy, you are not coming with me,” he declared in the most formal tone he could manage.

She turned the page, sighing nonchalantly. “Yeah I am.”

“No, you are not,” he said again, this time, with some venom.

Darcy looked up at him and he saw something flash in her blue eyes that he had never seen directed at him. “Yeah. I am,” she said again.

“No.” His voice was a whisper, but a princely one. Darcy would not die in a war if he could stop her.

She stood from her bed anger setting in her features. “If I don’t go, then you don’t go.”

“Darcy, that is absurd. I am a Prince of Asgard, it is my duty.”

“Oh yeah?” She snorted, sizing him up as he got to his feet, like she was getting ready to challenge him to a duel. “Well, I’m Darcy Lewis, your friend. It’s my duty to make sure you don’t die.”

Loki squared his shoulders, glaring down at the short mortal girl who returned his rage. “You. Will. Not. Go.” He commanded through gritted teeth. Did she not know the horrors of war? Of murder? Of killing?

“I’m going to protect you,” she said defiantly and Loki scoffed, not breaking away from their icy staring contest.

“You? Protect me? Darcy, you can hardly fight,” he growled, hoping to deter her from her dangerous notions.

Her eyes flashed again and she brought up her hand to poke him in the center of his chest. “Listen
here, Horny. I dragged your half-dead butt through Muspelheim when you couldn’t even walk. If I
hadn’t been there, you would have died. I am not letting you go without me.”

“Or what?” Loki challenged, trying not to take offense to her ‘Horny’ remark. “You cannot open
the portal by yourself. You would not be able to follow me. What have I to fear?”

Darcy crossed her arms. “I’ll make you sleep on the floor.”

“A price I am willing to pay,” he sassied back, thinking that he may actually sleep better without
her constant wriggling.

“You have to let me come with you!” she insisted, and her eyes became dewy with rising tears. “I
have to be there! Otherwise I’ll be stuck here, wondering if you’re going to live or die
or...whatever! What if you need help and there is no one there for you!? You can’t just...you can’t
make me stay here, Loki!” She protested, punching him in the arm again.

He would admit, she had gotten stronger, but her punches were still weaker than an Asgardian’s.

“No Darcy! If you go you will die!”

“You don’t know that!” she argued, the fateful tear slipping down her cheek.

“I know that it is a possibility,” he said as decisively and as softly as possible. He had not seen
Darcy cry before and it worried him.

“Please, Loki? You’re my best friend.” She sniffed, looking up at him with open, pleading, watery
eyes.

He frowned at her, hastily attempting to settle his inner turmoil. On one hand, he would not have
Darcy die. If she went to war with him and they did not have a suitable enough plan, she would die.
On the other hand, if she kept looking at him with those eyes accompanied by that voice…

“Darcy…”

“Please, Loki?” she said again tenderly, wrapping her arms around his middle while her shoulders
gave a little tremble.

He had never truly denied her anything before and he was finding it extremely difficult. Sighing,
he held her close, patting her back soothingly. “If I say yes, will you promise me you will not
purposefully seek out danger?”

She nodded against his chest.

“Promise me.” He told her, gently pushing her shoulders back.

Darcy’s blue eyes were rimmed red, but she straightened her posture and quirked a smile up at him.

“I promise.”

They linked pinkies in solemn agreement.

***

The remainder of that evening, after Darcy took a shower, ate dinner, and brought him up some
pizza rolls, they studied battle strategy.

If he thought politics and meetings were tedious, this was torture. Asgardian generals all seemed to
have strategies for killing off different races, but none for politically surviving a civil war. Darcy
suggested they take hints from American History, but he didn’t like those ideas either. The Americans had done a terrible job of stabilizing their own government during their own Civil War.

About two hours of skimming and searching and reading, Darcy threw down an Asgardian book. “This is so stupid. We need to keep them alive, not start Total War!”

Loki sighed in agreement, picking up another book. “I think we should look somewhere other than Asgardian texts. Or Midgardian ones for that matter…”

Darcy shook her head, standing up to pace her floor, her toe occasionally bumping Jörmungandr’s tail. “No…there’s this book. I remember my History teacher was telling me about it because I was asking her questions about China.” She snapped her fingers, perking up and pointing at Fenrir. “The Art of War, by Sun Tzu.”

He grimaced and conjured a copy of the book she mentioned, cracking it open to the first page. He read bits of it, Darcy leering over his shoulder in attempt to soak up knowledge. Out of all the things they’d read that evening, it was proving to be the most informative as well as strategy went. In fact, he’d venture to say it was almost helpful.

“Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” Darcy read the Chinese text aloud in English. “What do you think?”

Rubbing his eyes, Loki stood, thinking over what they had read. Sun Tzu was a well-seasoned warrior and he knew his way around the government as well as he did the battle field. His strategies for destructive domination were good, but his theoretical approaches on battle did more to strengthen Loki’s thoughts on Nornheim.

“I think,” he began, reaching into his coat and pulling out his notebook, “we should use that. We need to break their resistance without fighting.”

“Great.” Darcy agreed, flopping back onto the pillows. “How?”

With a quick pen, he began literally dissecting different spells, taking their roots and meanings, tossing around the phrases. “Magic, of course.”

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He could not say he slept well that night.

Not only was Darcy especially squirmy, Jörmungandr and Fenrir were also restless. Just as he began to nod off, Darcy set out to suffocate him with her body. Irritated and tired, he first thought he could fight her back by spreading out his limbs and conquering the space as she sometimes did. This failed. He could not pry himself out of her hold to move his arms. So, instead, he attempted to relax and ignore Fenrir’s dreaming whines and Jörmungandr’s insistent slithers over his back and eventually found rest.

Not an hour later, he felt Darcy get up and stretch. He expected her to poke him awake like she usually did, slowly and painfully bringing him from sweet slumber to the real world. But today, she didn’t. She sat up with her back against the headboard and yawned. Fenrir awoke as well, stepping on and over Loki’s body to sit on Darcy’s legs.

“I’ve never been to war, Fenrir.” She whispered to the dog. “What if…what if you and Frank get into trouble while we’re there? Or Frank eats all of the Norns and Asgard gets in bigger trouble?”
Loki nearly groaned. She wanted to bring the animals as well? Would he just set aside all his duties to defend the mortals? Was Jörmungandr mortal? He must find out. It would be devastating if all his friends died before him.

“Fenrir? What if our plan doesn’t work?” she was silent for another second. “Do you think Asgard will be okay? And Loki? What if everyone wants to kill him because he’s the prince?”

Loki cracked open his eyes just a bit to see Darcy softly rubbing Fenrir’s ears while he quietly whined and licked her nose. At this point, Loki was positive he had not made a wise decision by telling Darcy she could go. How dull could he be? She was mortal! If she went missing, the Midgardians would wonder where she had gone off to. And if she died…

He could not even think about it.

Snuggling into his pillow, he tried to abandon thought for just a few moments and enjoy the feel of Jörmungandr’s cool scales against his arm. Eventually, Darcy got up and began her morning rituals of opening the blinds and stretching her muscles. After a few moments, the sound of pages being turned filled the room.

Deciding, at last, it was time to begin the day, Loki sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“Good morning.” Darcy whispered, gently flipping through a book on herbs from Vanheim.

“Morning.” He replied, sitting up and pulling his feet out of the bed. Sigyn’s key tapped his chest and dinged lightly in the peaceful morn.

Darcy glanced over at him, standing to curiously take the key in hand. “What’s this?”

He sighed, closing his eyes and falling back on the covers. “A key,”

“Is it Sigyn’s?” she asked, her tone teasing.

How could she guess that so fast? “Why would you even make that assumption?”

Darcy smirked at him, a hand on her hip, her hair a wild mess atop her head. “Her name is on the side of it.”

Loki examined the key, and sure enough, Sigyn’s name was engraved on the side. “Ah. So it is.”

“She gave you a token?” Darcy giggled, but it was early enough so she did not chide her silly little rhymes at him.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m going to war, Darcy. It is expected.”

“Oh, whatever. You’re totally happy about it,” she quipped, waking Jörmungandr with a kiss on his scaly head.

He smiled, his grogginess beginning to fade away. He would miss so much about Darcy if she were to die. Moments like these when they fell into easy pace with the other. When she sat in front of him without question for him to brush out the knots in her hair and they talked about interesting things they learned. Darcy would ask him questions about things she didn’t understand and Loki would ask her questions about Midgard. He felt more like himself when he was with Darcy. Freer. Like he didn’t have to be in competition with Thor or put up with politics. He only had to be sharp with his tongue to counter Darcy’s friendly snark.
Once her hair was combed and pulled back into a tight bun, she stood, rubbing her brow. “So, I was thinking. We’re going to go to war, right?”

“No. We’re going to go have tea with the Allfather after riding a griffin to Muspelheim,” he said, beginning to neaten his own black locks.

“Haha, very funny. You know what I mean,” she sighed. “I was just wondering if I should have armor? I don’t know. You have armor, and everyone else will have armor and stuff…”

Loki deadpanned. How could he not have thought of this? Something as simple as armor. “Of course. You will most certainly be needing it.” He assured, pushing back his hair one last time before standing up.

Darcy’s smile lit up the room. “Awesome! Alright. I was thinking I could have, like, some wicked awesome silver and purple colors and awesome metal and…or you know, you could decide.”

He gave her a small grin. “It will be your armor, Darcy. You should like how it looks. But, so far, you’ve only trained for quick combat. You should be able to move around. But, the material must also be strong enough to withstand the slice of a blade.”

Darcy waited patiently as he cast a few spells, carefully creating her armor. Not that he was biased, but he found that leather was extremely useful in protection if the wearer intended to be flexible in their attacks. So long as Darcy did not get hit often, it would keep her safe. However, her armor could not be entirely leather, that would not protect against flying arrows and unsuspected blades. He also conjured armored plates for her wrist guards, chest and head. A thin mail wove between the layers of her outfit as an added precaution.

The armor was mainly black, but there were strips of purple fabric peeking between. It was not a common color on Asgard so he would easily be able to identify her if need be. The pants and books were sturdy but they clung to her so she would not trip during battle. The collar of her short coat was stiff so if a blade came down against her neck, it would meet some resistance. Silver plates of armor wrapped around her wrists, secured her chest and adorned her head.

The helmet he debated for a while. No doubt she would need one, but deciding what symbol it should hold was another thing. Wings stood for power and boldness. He would never question Darcy’s boldness. Yet, it did not match her style of fighting. Also, they were on Thor’s helm and Darcy was his friend, not Thor’s. It just wouldn’t seem right to acquaint them like that.

She could have horns, like him, but they were his symbol. Honestly, he was confused by his own helm. Horns stood for offense and challenge. Yes, he was always looking for a challenge, but not competitively and most certainly not in combat. Perhaps the council’s decision was made based on the power he displayed on that day. He was a challenge to his opponents.

Either way, horns like his would be ill suited. She was not nearly elusive enough to share his symbol.

“What’s taking so long?” she pestered, poking him in the belly.

He batted her hand away. “I’m trying to decide what should go on your helm.”

“You mean animal stuff?” she asked, tapping the metal on her head.

He shook his head exasperatedly. Only Darcy would call it that… “Yes. Only, I can’t decide what yours should be. What do you think?”
“Cat ears.” She answered immediately.

“Cat ears?”

“Cat ears.”

“Darcy, I do not think that—“

She held up a hand, “Nope. I’ve decided, I want cat ears. You can’t change my mind.”

“But Darcy—“

“Bup bup bup, nope,” she said, pressing her pointer finger to his lips. “Cat ears.”

Relenting, Loki conjured her silver helmet with two pointed feline ears atop her head. She immediately ran to the mirror and touched the face guards. “Wow. This looks fabulous. Loki, you’re amazing.”

“I know. Many have said so before.” He yawned, gracelessly throwing his body back down on her bed. He had to admit, Darcy did look rather nice in her armor. Nonetheless, he feared for her.

“What should we do for breakfast?” Darcy asked as Loki conjured her swords. She belted them to her sides, pacing back and forth the room. “I mean, we’re going to war, so should we, like, eat a big breakfast?”

Loki shook his head, “I will pack snacks in Hel’s saddlebag for later. Most warriors do not eat before battle. Hunger makes them less lethargic and they fight better because of it.”

Darcy thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, I guess that makes sense. Let’s run over the plan one more time before we go. Then you can conjure armor for Fenrir and Frank and then you can put yours on. Do you think we can take any books with us? And…Loki! Get out of bed!”

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About thirty minutes later, Loki had made armor for the two animals, both of which were biting at their shiny new outfits while Darcy told them how remarkable they looked. Loki was dressed in his black armor that he had made new for adventuring purposes. He preferred not to use his ceremonial armor for fighting as Thor did. Sure, it had more grandeur, but he could not move as freely in it.

Darcy rubbed her brow as they discussed the last details of their plan. “I don’t know, Loki. Isn’t that part a little…”

“What?” he challenged.

“Risky? We don’t know if we—“

“—I—“

“—we can actually get through.” She finished, ignoring his interference.

“Darcy, do you trust me?” he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She smirked, “No.”
“I’m hurt.” He rolled his eyes, “You will have to trust me Darcy. It will take effort, but Sun Tzu is right. We must attack before the battle has even started.”

Darcy grimaced, shifting from foot to foot. She still did not like their agreement, yet he could see she was going to agree. “Fine. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

“Me? Really Darcy. I’ve never done anything that could be classified as stupid,” he said, attempting to move her thoughts away from that of their plans.

“One word, Loki: Microwave.”

He crossed his arms defiantly. “How was I supposed to know that would happen?”

“I don’t know. But it was pretty stupid,” she teased, a smile spreading across her face.

“I fixed it, didn’t I?”

“Quit stalling, Loki, and cast my double and let’s go already,” she reminded him, sliding under her bed, followed closely by Fenrir.

That was the first phase of their plan. Loki would cast Darcy a corporeal double that would stay in her room and speak with her parents if necessary. He had worked very hard on this particular spell. Casting doppelgangers wasn’t especially taxing anymore, but he could not keep his focus on her double when his attentions were needed elsewhere. With a very specifically worded spell, however, the copy of Darcy would do whatever necessary to insure Darcy was not found out whilst using very little of Loki’s magic.

Carefully he cast the spell and a projection of Darcy in her purple pajamas appeared, slowly turning into a solid form. The double smiled at him, then crawled under her covers.

The real Darcy peeked out from under the bed, “Awesome. Come on, Loki. We have a longship to catch.”

“Oh yes, we had best not be late for manslaughter,” he grumbled, moving under the bed to grip her hand and take them to Asgard.

***

Sif gave her freshly sharpened blade one last thorough once over with a whetstone before fitting it into the sheath on her hip. Yesterday, Thor had come to her, Fandral, Volstagg and Hogun with news of the war and asked that they accompany him. Immediately they agreed, eager to gain the title of warriors.

But Sif had to admit, the only one who was possibly anticipating the battle more than herself was Thor. Finally, this was the opportunity to prove her worth. To prove that she was not simply a lady playing with a knife. She was a warrior, as good as any man.

After tying her hair back into a tight bun and adjusting her armor, she left her chambers in search of Thor. Oddly enough, he was not in the dining hall, nor at the armory, training fields, or even his chambers. None of their friends had seen him on that morning either.

She was just about to go to the kitchens when a small, quiet voice of a lady chided to her. “Are you looking for Prince Thor, Lady Sif?”

She grimaced at the title, stopping in her tracks. She was not a lady and she would not speak like a
lady either. “Yes,” she very nearly growled.

Soft footsteps echoes through the hall and Sif reluctantly turned to the little lady that had interrupted her search. “Lady Sigyn.”

The blonde haired girl was quickly becoming a suitor’s dream. She had a well-regarded family, a pretty face, and the truest behaviors of a lady. But unlike most, she was not gloating, or cruel, or conniving in any way. She had never flaunted her position or the power her looks and wealth gave her. Fandral often gloated about the kisses he was able to steal from her (though everyone was convinced he spoke lies), Thor would sometimes say she was quite beautiful, even Hogun was caught staring after her on occasion. The only reason Volstagg did not pine after her is because he fancied another for her skills in the kitchen rather than her looks.

But the lady was never anything but refined politeness. It made hating her quite difficult.

Sif was not jealous. Of course, she would never be jealous of a weak little girl, whom, without her beauty, would be nothing. No. It did not matter to her that she could win the favor of Thor with a simple flick of her blonde hair. Not at all.

Because Sif was clearly not envious of Sigyn, she could see the finer points of this lady.

Sigyn did not seem the least bit interested in the warriors. She did not take interest in Thor or even Fandral. Sif had seen her, more than once, walking a bit too excitedly for a lady’s standards into the library. And everyone knew who spent the majority of their time there….

“I saw Prince Thor this morning in the library. He wondered if you or the others may be in search of him.” Sigyn said in that even, steady toned voice that gave nothing away except, perhaps, maybe the barest trace of sweetness.

Sif restrained a snigger. “Thor? In the library? You surely jest?”

“I’m afraid not.” Sigyn smiled, folding her hands in front of her and continuing her easy walk forwards. When she passed, her near white-blonde hair left the smell of honey and flowers in the air.

Sif grit her teeth, sure that she smelled a little like sweat, leather, and metal. Annoyed, Sif grumbled a thanks turning to stomp in the most unlady-like fashion towards the library.

“And Sif?” Sigyn called, her voice ringing like bells.

“What?”

Sigyn offered a more sincere smile that seemed to mock Sif to the very bone. “Good luck today and may your blade win you victory.”

Sif felt blood in her cheeks, whether from anger or embarrassment she did not know. Most ladies chastised her, glared at her in disgust even. But here was Sigyn, the most esteemed lady of them all, wishing her good luck. Surely she could manage a thanks.

Bowing slightly, Sif muttered a quick ‘thank you’ and hurried away.

Once in the library she was greeted by a lady in a yellow dress, pouring over a book. She greeted Sif with kind eyes and a stiff smile. Walking along the shelves, Sif checked the sections she figured Thor would most likely be in like strategy, history of battle, war mastery and so on. But he wasn’t there.
After poking around a bit more, Sif, on mere whim, went to Loki’s usual spot.

Sif couldn’t say she spent much time keeping track of what Loki did. She wasn’t sure anyone would be cursed with that task. But she did know a few things about him. Like how he spent less time in the library than he used to and more time out of the palace. From what word was getting around, he was quite apt at politics and even managed to help the court in a number of domestic issues.

This corner of the library reserved the title of “Loki’s Corner” not because of how often he used it in the past, but rather the likeness it held to him. The curtains on the window were green and the reflection of the sun off the wood table was almost gold. The section was not especially easy to find for a newcomer entering the library and the books in that area held so many different types of magical spells and languages it made Sif dizzy.

It surprised her to see Thor there, a book propped up in his lap, staring out the window. He jumped at her presence. “Sif.”

“Heart.” She greeted, walking to sit in the chair across from him while he closed the book. It was in some runic language she identified as Dark Elven. “Reading about magic.”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “I cannot read it. There are tricks to divulging the secrets of the text that most Aesir with the allspeak do not attempt throughout their lives.”

Sif nodded, watching her friend from across the table, waiting for him to speak. “How did you know where I was?”

“I encountered Lady Sigyn in the corridor. She told me.” Sif shrugged, taking out her blade to be assured of its sharpness once more.

Thor adorned a look of distaste. “She seemed almost disappointed to find me here. I asked her why she would be looking in the sorcerer’s section and she said she thought Loki might be reading.”

Sigyn raised a brow. “Jealous of Loki?”

Thor snorted, “Never.” He watched something out the window, remaining silent for a long time. “She did not offer me a token. A few have, but I did not accept them.”

Sif stowed her sword with a clang. “You fancy her then?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. At first, yes. She is beautiful. But in the brief times we have spoken, she does not take interest in the same things I do. Her family is wealthy and no doubt she would make a fine princess, yet…”

Something deep inside Sif seemed to settle. Thor did not take that great of interest in the Lady Sigyn. Sif sought to change the subject. They were going to war, not looking to court women. Well, she wasn’t anyhow. “Why are you here anyways?”

Thor looked down, as if ashamed. “Well, I suppose I was looking for Loki.”

“Loki?”

“Yes, Loki,” he said sternly, head snapping up. “You know, tall, skinny, black haired, fights with magic, my brother?”

Sif’s brow crinkled at his defense. “I’ve heard of him. So?”
Thor stood, taking Mjolnir in hand. “Loki has not been here. He was not in his chambers last night and he was not there this morning. Everyone knows Loki hates to get out of bed in the morning. It is unlikely that he would arise even now.”

“Since when do you concern yourself with what Loki does? He spends many nights out of the palace, you know that as well as anyone.”

“Yes, but the night before our first war?” Thor queried, pacing between the shelves. “He…he would know what to do…He usually does…”

That’s when it struck her. Loki was the image of princely restraint and collectedness. He kept his head level even when being chased by bilgesnipe and griffins. The Mighty Thor was nervous and he needed his little brother to calm his worries. “You’re nervous.”

“I am not,” he protested, twirling his hammer.

“You are,” Sif insisted, standing as well to stop Mjolnir from hitting a stack of neatly piled tomes. “Why?”

Thor sighed, dropping his weapon and letting his eyes meet hers. “Father once told Loki and I that a good king fights the best when he has more to lose. He has his kingdom that relies on him to survive. Yesterday, after I heard there was to be a war, I did not feel as though I had anything to lose. I felt like I could face death a thousand times and I only had honor to gain from it.” He hesitated, drawing a hand through his hair.

“I did not act like a Prince of Asgard. Loki did. Loki said he had everything to lose.” Thor finished.

“Then he is a coward.” Sif said, clapping her friend on the arm.

“I thought that as well.” Thor said, leaning against the shelf nearest to him. “But the more I considered his words, I realized that he meant it for the good of Yggdrasil. He fights for a reason.”

“So do you.”

“I fight for my own honor, Sif. Is that what a prince is to do? Fight for himself?” he straightened his shoulders and Sif found, for the first time in their time together, that she had to look up to see directly into his eyes.

She thought about what she wanted to say for a few seconds before grasping her friend’s shoulders. “Then fight for the good of Asgard. You care about this kingdom, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—“

“And you realize the fault in what your beliefs were?”

“I suppose, but Sif—“

“Then fight for it. You are a prince. Your responsibilities exceed those of most men, but you still have their desires for honor. Asgard earns glory through its crown.” She encouraged strictly, giving his thick shoulders a strong shake. Honestly, Sif was impressed. Thor had matured some in the past few months. He no longer spat in disgust at the mere mention of his brother. Rather, he seemed to accept Loki and, though they did not share political views, defended him when others joked of his effeminate sorcery.

Thor blinked vacantly for a moment before quirking a small grin. “You are right, Sif. Truly, I
thank you for your council.” He said, lifting his hand to affectionately squeeze where the back of her neck met her shoulders. “I will fight for Asgard and for her people.” His eyes twinkled with sincerity as his thumb touched the skin behind her ear. “And for my friends.”

“I’m always right.” She reminded him breathily, trying hard to ignore the blush that crept up her cheeks and her heartbeat that could be felt in each of her toes. For a brief second, she could imagine closing that distance between them and—

She retreated from his grasp, unsure of what insane thought had just passed through her mind. Kissing Thor? No. That notion was just…wrong. Very wrong indeed. “Come. Let us go to the longships lest we wish to remain in the capital training for another hundred years.”

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“Must you?”

“Yes.”

“Darcy, I do not wish for you to—“

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin and Loki knew he would not win this argument. “We agreed that I would go with you. It doesn’t count if we don’t travel in the same longship.”

Loki sighed, kneading his brow and looking out over the expanse of sky before them. As it turns out, on Midgard, all of their ships traveled on water rather than in the sky. “Fine. But Thor and his friends will be with us.”

“Fine.” She said back with just as much attitude as he had reluctance.

Together, closely followed by Fenrir and Jörmungandr, Darcy and Loki boarded the ship reserved for royal passengers save the Allfather who had his own.

Darcy peered over the edge of the ship and Loki had a terrible vision of her falling from their ship into the low seated streets and rivers of Asgard. “Darcy, come away from the ledge.”

“You’re not my mom, Loki,” she said, standing on her toes to get a better view.

He felt as though a stone had been dropped into the pit of his stomach. “No. I’m sure I would remember giving birth to such a disobedient child. Now, please, by the name of Odin, get away from the ledge.”

Giggling, Darcy stepped away from the edge of the ship. “So, the plan?”

Loki quickly took count of his five daggers and made sure they were all safely secured in his coat. “I have no doubts that after we land, there will be an attack. The generals of the armies will meet to define the terms of the battle before we begin. The field on which we will most likely be fighting is broad and flat and has been used for many skirmishes throughout Asgardian history.”


He nodded to her, continuing his breakdown of the territory. “We will land east of the field where, if need be, we shall make camp. On the west side of the field is an incline and a forest. The terrain gets woodier and rockier as you ascend.”

Darcy smirked, “We have to get to the top before everyone starts stabbing each other.”
Loki nodded. “It’s rocky, in some places, muddy in others. But atop the slope is a river. A wide one. It leads to a waterfall nearing the end of Nornheim civilization.”

“We have to get to that river and—“

“There you are brother! I was beginning to fear you had run off!” Boomed Thor’s boisterous voice as he climbed into the longship.

Loki smiled in greeting, inclining his head in a slight bow. It was not, generally speaking, easy to simply tilt his head when wearing his helm. The horns were not made for delicate encounters.

“What silly fears you have then.” He said in return as Sif, Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg boarded as well.

Thor grinned as well, his gaze shifting to Darcy. He cocked his head to the side curiously, “Who is this?”

“Uhhh…” Darcy managed and Loki smirked. She had wished to ride with him. Did she not remember what her identity was the last time she was in Asgard? Lady Darcy of Nornheim.

Nornheim. Oh gods. Thank Odin they did not seem to remember—

“You!” shouted Sif.

Nevermind then.

“Is it too late to say sorry?” Darcy asked, holding up her hands in surrender. Sif made to pounce on Darcy but was restrained by both Fandral and Volstagg, each grasping one of her upper arms.

“She’s…Loki’s…Nornheim…little…my hair!”

Fandral made a sound of recognition. “Lady Darcy of Nornheim! I do happen to remember your presence on Loki’s Ceremony.”

Thor looked to his brother, “Loki, what are you doing? You have brought our current enemy into our ship?! She will slit our throats before we reach Nornheim!”

Loki thought quickly, giving the golden prince an even glare. “Her loyalties lie with me. She believes the Norns’ demands are foolish, just as we do. She does not wish to see them warring with Vanahem for she knows it will be the death of her province and a heavy blow to Asgard.”

Sif broke free of her friends’ hold. “Let her speak for herself, Loki. What does this wench have to say?” she spat through bared teeth.

Darcy removed her helm revealing her still perfectly coiled bun, and tucked it under her arm. When she stepped forwards, Fenrir did so as well. “If Asgard and Vanahem engage in war, Jotunheim will join in as well. The last thing Asgard needs is to get into another war with the Frost Giants. Nornheim has a lot of land and stuff. If there’s a war, the cities and farms and homes will be destroyed. I don’t want that.”

Sif’s eyes narrowed as she looked Darcy up and down, scrutinizing her armor, weapons and helm. Loki dreaded she may ask about the cat ears. “The last time you were in the capital, you claimed you did not fight. You lied?”

Darcy shook her head. “I didn’t fight then. I do now. I’m not really good, but I probably won’t get stabbed. Maybe. Hopefully.”
The two girls stared at each other for a moment and Sif walked further onto the ship, obviously done with her interrogation. “Fine. But if you betray us, I will kill you.”

In return Darcy gave her a wide, gleaming smile while Fenrir glared at the warriors, daring them to take another step. She touched his head, urging him into his usual, less tense state. “So, you’re not still really angry about the hair thing? Or are you? Honestly, I think it looks really good on you. I mean, sometimes I wish I had black hair. But brown is okay too.”

Sif pressed her lips together so tightly they disappeared from her face, searching Darcy for any sign of malice. When she found none, a miniscule smile formed. “I suppose, it is not so awful after all.”

Thus, Sif and Darcy became friends. It was strange for Loki, to see his brother’s best friend and his best friend become acquainted so quickly. They talked about swords and armor and fighting techniques, then ventured onto war strategy, next to politics and Asgardian feminism.

Needless to say, it was an interesting ride. Loki stayed silent for most of it, reviewing the notes in his journal and occasionally looking up to make sure Darcy was getting along alright. Eventually, she and Sif integrated into conversation with the others. Loki made it his duty to man the ship and lead the capital’s fleets to Nornheim. He had learned to pilot a longship many years ago. It was one of the first freedoms he’d been allowed.

As happy as he was for Darcy making friends, he could not stifle the bit of jealousy that molded in his chest at her social behavior. His reputation with Thor and his friends did not make their conversations flow quite so smoothly.

The group laughed loudly at a joke Fandral had made and he looked up when they mentioned Sigyn’s name.

“Alas, I did not see her, lest she would have given me her token.” Fandral bragged and Loki rolled his eyes. Sigyn was not tasteless enough to be with Fandral.

Darcy spoke and Loki could hear the smirk in her voice. “Yeah right, Fandral. Sigyn totally likes Loki.”

Loki felt heat in his cheeks and he checked to make sure Sigyn’s key was still secure around his neck. Volstagg chucked, “Is it true, Loki? Have you truly won over Lady Sigyn?”

He faced the brightening Asgardian sky, not meeting their gazes. “A lady is not a prize to be won.”

“True.” Agreed Volstagg, “But you have captured her fancy?”

Loki let the smallest of grins escape him. He would not brag over earning Sigyn’s affection. She was beautiful, yes, but they did not know of her person. They did not know what her true laugh was like or the glint in her eyes when she learned something new. They didn’t know her favorite color was yellow and she liked it in the summer when she could wear lighter dresses. “I suppose so.”

A larger hand clapped him on the shoulder accompanied by a hearty laugh. “Well done, brother! ‘I suppose so’. Coming from you, Loki, that should mean you are to be wed in a number of days!”

“I had better survive war first.” Loki grimaced, elevating their ship only slightly to catch a drift of wind.

Everyone in the ship chuckled a bit, Darcy’s shameless peals sounding above them all.

“And what about you, Lady Darcy? Who is it you favor?” Fandral asked curiously. “A brave,
noble lady like yourself going to war…you would not have left a token for anyone?"

“I guess not. Someone would have to give me a token, shouldn’t they? Since I’m the one going off to war?” she wondered, scratching under Fenrir’s chin where he had no armor.

Fandral made a face, “But you are a lady. You don’t want another lady giving you a token.”

Darcy crossed her arms, “I don’t think it matters as long as I come back. That’s what a token is supposed to mean. That you have someone to come home to. A reason to make it out of war alive. It’s not something to boast over.”

A surge of pride rocketed through Loki. That was his Darcy…or, rather his friend Darcy. She could make an honest man out of Fandral yet.

Thor clapped Darcy on the shoulder like he had known her a thousand years. “So, Darcy, you do not favor anyone then?”

She scoffed, “What? Of course I like someone!”

This surprised Loki. Surely it was not Idiot Boy? No, anyone but Idiot Boy….

“Really?” asked Fandral, his wispy blonde hair blowing in the wind. “Who?”

“Hogun. Who else?” she teased and the whole boat laughed, including Loki. Even Hogun blushed a little.

Conversation weakened from there as they approached Nornheim. Loki kept his eyes on the rest of the fleet, knowing the Allfather’s ship would be at the back. The ship to his right was the general’s ship and he would land before Loki to make sure there would be no violence as the first royals descended. He would then talk to the Norns’ general and they would head out to battle.

Darcy was intrigued by Hogun being Vanir and Loki had never seen him look less grim than when Darcy asked him about his heritage while they sat cross legged on the ship floor. “So, there’s no threat of Vanaheim getting involved even though you’re Vanir?”

Hogun shook his head once, making it look like he had a crick in his neck. “My family and I are sworn to Odin and his family. We agreed a while ago to fight for Asgard and be citizens of this realm.”

“Why?” she kept asking, eyes gleaming over as he explained how his life tied into the workings of Asgardian politics. She was enamored.

“We appreciated Asgard and my parents were good friends of Odin. They believed life would be less hazardous for us here. My father is a noble, but served in his youth as a Warrior. The tribe he ruled once was destroyed by Jotuns during the last Great War. He was the last alive to be trained by and fight with their styles.” Hogun told her, his dark eyes open as he spoke in clipped tones. “He was…until he taught me.”

Loki had never heard Hogun speak so much in all the time he had known him. But there he was, Darcy’s curiosity prying him open just like it had Loki. “Why did your parents wait so long to become Asgardian citizens?”

Hogun tapped his fingers on the ground before him. “We lived in Vanaheim, in the capital for a very long time. But, my father was not happy there. He believed he owed Odin for avenging his home against Laufey’s army. When the Vanir began seeking alliances with Jotunheim, none of
which pulled through, he brought us to Asgard where we swore ourselves to Odin.”

Loki could taste the question Darcy was about to ask. He knew it was coming, and he anticipated Hogun’s response. “Do you hate the Jotunar?”

Hogun did not reply for a moment. “I have never met a Frost Giant. Most Vanir believe that they are just blue skinned people with murderous desires. Asgardians tell me they are monsters with a thirst for children’s blood. I met a Light Elf once who claimed he was friends with a Frost Giant named Hugnir who enjoyed looking after baby Frost Beasts and taming them to be house pets. I do not know if I hate anyone or not.” He ceased his tapping, looking back up to Darcy. “Of course, the Vanir also say that Aesir have more bloodlust than griffins and the dwarves say the same.”

Darcy tapped her chin pensively. “But would you feel any worse if you killed a Frost Giant than an Asgardian or one of the Vanir?”

He answered immediately. “No. On the battlefield, it does not matter what we are. I will kill whoever it is I am to kill, be it man or woman, Frost Giant or otherwise.”

Loki supposed that response is why they called him Hogun the Grim. Nevertheless, it was a respectable answer. He could tell Darcy was going to use it as a point against him later when they discussed the monstrosity of Frost Giants.

Jörmungandr wrapped his armored body along the prow of the ship, mouth wide open to accept the surge of gusting wind. Just on the horizon, Loki spotted the beginnings of cultivated farmland and the outskirts to Nornheim’s main city. “Prepare yourselves, we will be landing soon.”

Chapter End Notes

AAAAND there it is. Chapter 14. Good job me.
Okay! So, After that awesome cliff hanger there I feel as though there are a few things that need to be explained.

First off, Sif, Thor, Hogun, and Fandral are all about thirteen. Volstagg is a little bit older. Loki, Darcy, and Sigyn are eleven, almost twelve. Keep in mind, Loki is pretty old. He's a little over two thousand years of age and he's been practicing his entire life to be a good prince. Now, he's at the point where the pressure is on to take all that he learned and put it to use. Which is why Loki = Fabulous and Thor = Less than Fabulous when it comes to princing. (princing, it's a word)

Also, I feel like the way I'm doing the realms should be explained. Everything that's happening in Yggdrasil right now I'm kinda copying from WWI. Oops. I'm not creative enough to make my own history. I have to use Earth's. Anywho, Asgard, according to MCU is flat and made up of really big provinces. I don't know if Asgard is flat in my version or not. Something tells me I should figure that out, but I haven't yet. The skirmish with Nornheim is a bit of a rebellion, but it isn't a full blown war. The capital is just trying to deal with the rough group of Norns who want glory and power, so on and so forth.
Vanaheim is sort of just how Hogun explains it. There's a lot of really defined Nations that make up one realm. They have a capital where representatives will come forth from all of the nations to make a decision. So...yeah.

Alright, I'm sorry for killing all of you with my whacky ideas. If you think I'm taking the politics thing too far, just tell me and I'll tone it down. For now, I felt it was kind of important because in the movies Thor gives the notion that he and Loki have fought a lot of battles together and so it is my duty, as a fanfic author, to make those implications a reality through my fanfiction.

Darcy is already becoming a little politics buff an I'm referencing Sun Tzu. I don't really need to because he's been dead. A really long long time. But I'm going to respect the name even if I won't get sued for copyright infringement if I don't.

Thank you everyone for kudos, comments, souls, and bookmarks. I appreciate any kind of review you'd like to give me because I like attention and the more of it I get, the happier I feel.

And that's all for now, folks!
Frank and a Tree

Chapter Summary

Princes are in charge. Loki uses magic. Frank in Fenrir make a friend. Thor makes enemies. Loki is BAMF as hell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things went downhill the moment Loki landed their ship.

He should have realized Thor and his friends would not want Darcy to go now that they had met her. Sif practically demanded that she would have Darcy’s back during battle and insisted they spar to warm up. Darcy, after receiving a nod of approval from Loki, drew her blades and gestured for Sif to attack first.

Just as Darcy neatly dodged one of Sif’s strokes, Fandral took him off to the side. “Loki, might I inquire about your…how shall I put it…ways with the ladies?”

“I beg your pardon?” Loki asked, unbelieving that Fandral of all people would assume Loki was more privy to knowledge about women than he.

The blonde boy fanned out his hands as if presenting newfound and impossible information to the oblivious prince. “Loki, really, you have won the affection of Lady Sigyn. You gallivant around with a fine creature such as Lady Darcy. Are there other beauties you have yet to tell us about? Have you also been wooing Sif in your spare time?”

Darcy’s blade clashed with Sif’s, but it did not absorb the force of the shieldmaiden’s attack. She managed to slide her swords away so a loud scraping noise echoed across the trees as more ships descended. “Honestly, Fandral, you believe I have tricked them?”

“I see no other explanation for it! You are…well…you.” Fandral explained in a goading manner as Loki removed one of his daggers, twirling it expertly around his fingers as Darcy used her latest offensive move make a stab at Sif’s leg. Sif detected this attack and blocked it just in time, countering Darcy with a thrust of her blade.

“Indeed.” Loki agreed as the dagger flicked from his pinky and back around his thumb, “I am me. I am also a decent conversationalist.”

“What are you implying?”

Loki switched the dagger to his other hand, less concerned about Fandral’s pitiful encounters with women and more with the fight between Darcy and Sif. Off to the side, Thor had begun to duel with Hogun. “I implied the truth. You speak of nothing but your own deeds or adventures you’ve had with Thor. Show interest in their lives or at least have more interesting undertakings.”

Fandral huffed and Darcy had one sword around the back of Sif’s neck and the other aimed at her stomach when she was swept off her feet by one of her opponents more powerful legs. The duel ended with the tip of Sif’s sword to Darcy’s throat. Loki nearly collapsed onto the dirt and begged
the gods to hate him just a little less. It was cruel of them to make his best friend a Midgardian. Why couldn’t she just be an immortal? Darcy Lewis, an immortal girl with immortal strength who he would feel perfectly comfortable taking out to war with him. That sounded nice. But, it was not to be. He was stuck fretting over her frail mortality.

Sif offered Darcy her hand a smile on her face. “You’re not bad, Lady Darcy. Perhaps a bit lacking in strength...have you no muscle? I swear it felt as though I had tipped a twig when I at last disarmed you.”

Darcy smirked, sheathing her weapons. “Hey, I do have some strength! You know, like, a little bit.”

Sif stowed her own sword. “You have excellent form. The only suggestion I have is to build up your strength. Two blades suits you. I do not know if you are strong enough to hold a shield.”

Pouting at the mention of needing to be stronger, Darcy removed her helm. “Yeah. I like having two blades. My instructor told me it was better since I don't have a shield.”

“They are quite wise. Who is your instructor?”

From the fleet of ships, the commanding officer of Odin’s elite guard, the Einherjar, approached him. He gave a brief formal bow to both him and Thor who had just disarmed Hogun. “Your Majesties, there is urgent news.”

Thor spoke first, “Has the Allfather given us specific commands?”

The officer hesitated, “The Allmother wishes for me to tell you most discreetly, Your Grace.”

Loki gave a slight nod to dismiss the warriors and Darcy. She stared at him with concerned eyes before backing away with Sif. Once they were out of hearing range, Loki turned to the officer. “Speak, if you will.”

He stood straight, shoulders squared and body tense as if ready for a fight at any moment. The horns of his helm beamed in the sunlight. “The King went into the Odinsleep shortly before our departure. He was prepared for it and he left a note advising that his duties be left to his majesties Thor and Loki Odinson.”

Damn.

Now, not only was he looking out for Darcy, a dog who thought he was an infinite serpent, an infinite serpent who thought he was a dog, and himself, but also the entirety of the guard. Good. No problem. Absolutely marvelous.

He maintained a straight face quite unlike Thor who looked utterly thrilled to be given such responsibility. “We shall charge them at once then!”

“Thank you, Commander. Go prepare your men. Remind them this skirmish is not a fight for power or land. Any man, woman, or child they kill will be Asgardian blood spilt. You are dismissed.” Loki ordered, thankful that he had not eaten yet as bile was already thick in his throat.

Thor did not seem to be having the same contorting anxiety. “Loki, don’t be so grim. We are doing this for Asgard.”

“Yes. I agree. We are already wounded, let us not cause ourselves anymore casualties.” Loki muttered, mostly to himself. “Go get our friends, tell them of what has happened. We will not
attack until the General has brought back the conditions of this battle. I doubt they would be anything too drastic, but we must know before we give any commands.”

“Loki, you worry too much. After today, the Norns will know never to rebel again! Asgard will be whole.” Thor declared proudly, gripping Mjolnir at his side.

It took all of his willpower, but somehow, Loki managed not to tie Thor to a tree and leave him there for the rest of the day. “Thor. We do not want bloodshed. We want very little bloodshed. If more Asgardians die, they will not be there to support our armies when an external threat prevails. We will lose the valuable mines, farmlands, and population Nornheim has to offer. I—“

“Brother,” Thor said hotly, “Father left both of us in charge. I am the eldest and I respect your views. But out of the two of us, which has more experience fighting?”

Loki was nearly trembling with rage when a voice spoke from behind him.

“Thor, that’s stupid. Just do what Loki says. If you kill too many people your dad will get upset. Why don’t you listen to Loki’s plan?”

Loki thanked the gods for Darcy Lewis.

“Lady Darcy, we will fail if we use Loki’s plan. The Norns will slaughter us!” Thor argued.

She smirked. “Have you heard Loki’s plan?”

“Well, no.”

“And do you have a plan that consists of more than just running into the field and hitting people?” she sassed and Loki found too much pleasure in the way Thor was rendered speechless.

“Not exactly…”

“Good. Loki, tell Thor your plan and then we can go do it.” She said, peering around a tree. “Where’s Fenrir and Frank?”

Loki wasted no time addressing his scheme. “Before the battle begins, you will run out of the field in the direction of the main city and—“

“Loki, that is ridiculous. The archers will have us before we reach the gate!” Thor interrupted.

Loki shushed him. “Trust me, you will be able to make it. You have Mjolnir do you not? Once you are in the city, move quietly until you are inside the castle of the High Lords. It will be heavily guarded and at this point, I’m afraid, yes you will need to fight. Kill the guards, only if necessary to hold conference with the Lords. I will meet you there.”

Thor cocked his head skeptically. “Are you sure about this, Brother?”

“Positive. Advise the men to do as the commander and general say. There is something I must do.”

Loki could see through a break in the trees, the general of the Norns’ army walking forwards to meet the King’s general in the center of the plane. He and Darcy needed to go west immediately. He marched over to Darcy who was asking Fandral if he had seen where the animals went.

“Darcy, I believe we have business to attend to in informing certain individuals of your presence.” He excused before Darcy could blabber any more.
“Right! I’ll be back in a bit.” She said to them, hurrying away further into the eastern wood. “Loki.” She said after they were far enough away that they would not be heard. “What are we doing? The river is that way? You sounded really weird over there. Like, princy. You’re really good at this.”

Loki took her by the shoulders to focus her attention on the task at hand. “I am aware. I have been practicing for a very long time. As for the river, we will teleport there.”

In a flash of gold and green light, they were on the eastern side of the battle field, standing on incline and looking down at an army of miscellaneousley armored Norns wearing equal expressions of anxiety and determination. Many looked as though they wished to jump from their skin. Loki resolved his will to stop this war as soon as possible. The main city where all of the High Lords remained during the skirmish was only a few kilometers northwest of the river. If this plan went through, he could make the war end in an hour.

“Let’s go.”

Frantically climbing, gripping onto trees for support and stepping over perturbingly sharp rocks, Loki and Darcy made their way up the hill.

“Loki…” Darcy panted, her now muddy boots nearly slipping on a rock. “Why…can’t we just… teleport to the top.”

She grabbed at a tree, missing its nearest branch by a few inches and would have fallen had Loki not taken her hand. “I’m saving my magic for what we have planned. I’ve never cast a spell on such a wide scale before.”

“I’ve…never…climbed a hill…this steep…before….” Darcy breathed, wiping perspiration from her forehead. “Are you seriously not sweating?”

Loki rolled his eyes, wrapping an arm around her waist to support most of her weight. “Come on, Darcy. We’re almost there.”

They moved at a more rapid pace with Loki helping Darcy. In a matter of minutes they were peering over the edge of their recently scaled hill and onto the battlefield where the generals were walking back to their respective sides. “It’s about to start.” Darcy said, turning her wide blue eyes up to his green ones.

“We should move quickly.” He told her grimly.

Suddenly, a horn blew and his heart jumped to his throat. He was behind schedule. Odin’s absence had set them back. There was no way they could run there now. He would need Hel. “Change of plans Darcy.” He said, turning to the thicket beside him. “Hel! Come on girl, I need you a bit sooner than expected!” he shouted into the wood.

Darcy came up beside him, gripping his arm in anticipation as the soft whisper of bones came trotting towards them. “Hey Hel.” She greeted the horse.

She whinnied, nudging Darcy’s helm with her nose as Loki mounted her. He offered Darcy his hand to help her up as well. “Come. We must move, Hel. As fast as possible.”

Hel was old. Loki knew Hel was old. She was also half dead. Apparently, that meant she could run at least sixty miles per hour if she wanted to. He and Darcy tested this in the spring. Hel did not seem bothered by the speed, and Jörmungandr really liked it. Unfortunately, Loki and Darcy did not. It was hard to hold on and hurt after a while. But, at the moment, having a horse that could run
that fast was horribly convenient.

In seemingly no time at all, they reached the rushing roar of Asgard’s longest, widest, deepest and most dangerous river. Though it was streaming along, the water peaking white across the tops of mossy rocks, steam rose from the surface in Nornheim’s muggy summer heat. “Brilliant.” Loki said, dismounting Hel, lending Darcy his hand.

She jumped down, checking Hel’s saddlebags for snacks. “You should eat something before you cast this spell. I’ve got three protein bars, two apples, and a cheese stick. What do you want?”

“Are there no fruit snacks?” he asked, sinking to his knees by the riverside.

Darcy tossed him the apple. “Fruit snacks aren’t healthy. Eat the apple and the protein bar.”

He did as she said, devouring the snacks as swiftly as possible and feeding Hel the core. Half of it fell out the bony side of her skull. Shakily, he got to his feet and reviewed the spell he and Darcy had concocted last night. Under normal circumstances, the trick he had in mind would take minimal energy. But the space in which such a spell must cover…he could not cast an illusion so large yet. He needed the aid of this blasted river.

Darcy sensed his apprehension. “Hey,” she soothed, taking his hand. “You can do this. And, don’t forget, I’m here. So, if you faint or something, I can totally protect your body from bilgesnipe or whatever.”

“That was the least comforting thing anyone has ever said to me.” He groaned. But he could not help the smile that dawned on his face. “Stand back and remember, do not try to navigate until I tell you to do so.”

Darcy smiled reassuringly, giving his hand one last squeeze before letting go.

With a resolute clench of his jaw, Loki focused his energy on the river letting the words in his head flow through his body and spark in his fingertips. Every ounce of conviction in him went into this one spell. No one would get harmed in this skirmish. It was pointless, it was demeaning and it meant nothing but trouble.

A small gasp came from behind him and he knew it had worked. “Oh, Loki.”

He blinked, searching around him for Darcy, but could not see her through the thick hazy fog that had settled over them. Everything he saw was but a swirl of gray-hued steam, swirling and blank before him. No doubt, the cloud would move to the battlefield and the soldiers would not be able to see two inches in front of their noses. Without wasting another second, Loki cast a spell over him, Hel and Darcy, allowing them to see through the vapor.

Darcy’s face was alight with a grin when she came into view. “Man, I thought my eyesight was bad before! That was terrible!”

“I quite agree.” He said, hoisting himself onto Hel’s back. “Come. We must get to the castle to confront the High Lords. Gods only know what Thor would do if he got there first.”

“Let’s go.” Darcy approved, pulling herself up as well, moving her arms to grip his middle. “Wait, how would Thor get there if he can’t see through the fog?”

“He has Mjolnir.” Loki explained, “He can fly with it.”

“Yeah, but does Thor know that?” Darcy said snarkily and Loki shrugged.
“Perhaps…perhaps not.”

Darcy giggled in response. “He’ll figure it out.” She adjusted her position Hel, straightening her helm. “Fenrir and Frank still aren’t here. Oh no, what if Frank has eaten all the Norns! What if Fenrir does that thing where he tries to hiss and he pees on a Lord!? What if Frank—”

Loki slapped a hand over his friend’s mouth, unsure if he could mentally handle any more worrying. “Darcy, let’s not think about that right now. I’m sure Fenrir and Jörmungandr are fine."

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Idun could not help but notice as a thin layer of fog began to creep along the sides of her orchard. This wasn’t unnatural in the summertime, but it typically only happened in the morning. Then again, it was a hot summer and perhaps it had rained over a few nearby areas. She wasn’t too concerned.

Her orchard was not very large. There were four apple trees and each produced about thirty apples per season. Cultivating the golden fruit was simple enough, they grew like regular trees and if seeded properly, more trees would grow. However, keeping the immortal fruit a rare commodity was one of the charms of having them. Asgardians, once they reached full adulthood, were welcome to the fruit if they requested it. Anyone sworn to the Allfather would have no trouble obtaining one. For those outside of the Realm Eternal, the apples were of great price. The fee could not be paid in gold nor any currency in all the Nine Realms. They would receive their emolument through labor. They must prove they were worthy of the opportunity to live forever.

Prior to common belief, it was not Odin who made that decision. He did not entirely control the apples. He was not their grower nor their funder.

Idun was and hence she decided who would get the fruits.

She relaxed on her chaise lounge, thinking of how rain could affect the harvest. Generally speaking, it couldn’t hurt the apples, but it would prolong their growing period. That was another reason Idun was the only farmer of such a magical plant. If you gave the apples away at the wrong time, they could have…interesting results on the consumer.

If one was eaten too early while the apples were bitter, it could cause tiny magical anomalies to spark inside the eater and growth issues may occur. Usually, they would fluctuate in size, sometimes rapidly, sometimes slower. Then there were rare cases when they simply got bigger and bigger and only died when they begged for death for fear of becoming too large. It was quite sad really. Idun never gave away apples that weren’t ripe. But, in her younger days, when she was still learning the ways of the golden fruits, she had hired help that would assist in her experiments concerning the productivity of her crop.

But, those she hired were not quite as dedicated to secrecy as she. They would sneak out fruit to their friends before they reached the prime age and their friends would suffer whatever strange magic the stage of the apple ensued. It amazed her that no sorcerer had yet been able to undo the magic of the apples. Anyone left in the cruel condition an overly or unripe apple caused, would remain that way until they died. Unless, of course, the apple had given them immortality as well. Then, they need ask to be slain or kill themselves for the effects to end.

Looking out across the four-tree orchard, something caught Idun’s eye. A glint of steel in the midday sun.

She stood from her seat, instantly on guard. Her home was heavily warded. No man alive would be
able to simply stumble upon this ground!

Carefully, she snuck from the wide marble stone balcony of her home, down a curved staircase and out into her precious field where she saw the light. The fog, she dare call it that for she had never seen fog so thick, blocked her view from the farthest tree and the one closest to the wood. She made to step into it but stopped.

With great precaution, she licked her lips to taste the dewy moisture that clouded her property.

That was no ordinary fog. It was enchanted. Created by a sorcerer. A strong one at that. No novice would be able to achieve such a task. Whoever lurked near her beloved apples was no one to be dealt with lightly.

Being a rather trained sorceress herself, Idun ran through a few spells she knew to use in offensive combat. But before she could step into the felonious veil, something long, dark and very dangerous slithered from its depths with a mouth full of what looked like tree roots.

Terrified, Idun stumbled backwards, watching in horror as the long, sleek black body of an Infinite Serpent made itself visible, it’s long pink tongue licking leaves from its mouth. It cocked its head at her, eyes shining with something she could only identify as curiosity. As if it couldn’t get any worse, a small whine sounded from the haze, the creature that made it stumbling out as well. It was a wolf. A wolf in silver armor.

Idun watched in disbelief as the snake looked…sadly…at the wolf and coughed up at least three half-digested golden apples. The wolf ate them with relish and Idun found her senses.

An Infinite Serpent ate one of her trees. How dare it!?

Furiously she raised her hands, letting them light with golden magic. “You. Who are your masters and how did you come upon this place?” she sneered at them.

The animals did not seem to detect her harsh tone and were instead staring at her ball of magic, completely beguiled by it. Though, it was not like they had never seen it before. They did not react skeptically towards it. Quite the contrary, they both seemed rather friendly towards the magic which was not a common response from anyone.

The snake made a sound similar to that of a bark and the wolf made something that sounded like a hiss while simultaneously relieving itself. Odd. These animals did not seem to be threatening. Though…they were quite strange.

The serpent opened its mouth in semblance of a smile before slithering over to Idun and draping its sleek body over hers. At first, her heart beat so fast, she was afraid it might jump out of her chest. But she sensed no malice from the creature as it continued to mouth her jaw and hum contentedly. Could snakes even hum?

She did not know. But this one was, quite obviously, giving her a cuddle. The dog trotted forward to lick her cheek and nose. “What are you two?” she asked, returning their affection with pats to their heads.

They didn’t respond and she got the feeling they weren’t going to anytime soon. As angry as she was at them for eating her tree, she couldn’t stay mad. They were like troublesome little children.

But whose troublesome little children were they?

The Infinite Serpent and the Wolf both adorned armor, but neither bore any mark of a smith or seal
of house. It was also seamless. Each piece was of perfect construct with no imbalance or slight imperfection. Their armor was magically produced. By the looks of it, a very able sorcerer had gone a long way to make sure their pets didn’t get hurt.

Unfortunately, it hadn’t stopped them from eating the apples.

“Oh you poor darlings.” She said to the animals as they continued to snuggle closer to her. The wolf put his nose in her black hair and whined.

Standing up from her place on the ground, she gestured for the creatures to follow her. “Come, little friends. Let me make sure you aren’t wounded by the fruit.”

Thor did exactly as Loki said.

Before the battle began, he gathered up his friends and led them away from the battlefield, marching off in the trees so no one would see them. The horn sounded and battle cries could be heard as each side rushed from the forest and attacked the other violently. It was not five minutes before all sounds of conflict halted.

“What is that?” Sif gasped turning to the field where a thick fog had spread out and was rushing through the forests and nearer to them.

Thor cursed Loki. Did he know this? Was this his doing? It did not matter, he would not be caught in the fog. He needed to get to the Lords so he could teach them a lesson about causing a war on Asgard. “Run!” he commanded of his friends, urging them to sprint towards Nornheim’s main city.

Thor would not say that he was a slow runner, he was not. In fact, he was a relatively fast runner. The fog, however, was faster than both he and his friends and soon they were engulfed in a cloud so thick, he could not see Mjolnir before his face.

“Thor?”

“Sif?”

“Thor?”

“Fandral?”

“Volstagg!”

“Is that you Sif?”

“Fandral. If you do not get your slimy mitts off of my—“

“Apologies. Only I cannot—“

“Fandral! How crass of you to—“

“All of you, stop!” Thor sighed, searching for their bodies through the mist. No soldier would dare fight through this lest risk bashing their own teammate. “Are you all here?”

“Aye.”

He didn’t hear anything from Hogun, so Thor assumed he was present. “Alright. We cannot
navigate in this damn haze!”

They grumbled in agreement as Thor thought with all his mightiness.

This was no ordinary fog. It must be an illusion of sorts. Either it was made by Loki, or a different sorcerer. However, Nornheim was not renowned for sorcery of any kind and if magic was looked down on in the capital, it was even more so here. It was highly unlikely they would use magic in battle. It must have been Loki.

But Loki told him to go to the castle. Why would Loki say that when he plainly could not see to make his way there?!

Perhaps he did not want him to be there! Perhaps this was a part of his scheme to make sure he failed at his first war!

Accompanied by the Lady Darcy as well…

Thor shook his head. As mysterious as Loki could be, he doubted that he would try such a foul move on him. Had his brother made a mistake? Or did he expect him to make it through this blinding moisture? It was not as if he could simply fly abov—

“Sif, take my hand,” Thor demanded into the gray space before him, waving his hand about until he hit a thin, muscular arm.

She raised her hand to grip his but was surprised when he pulled her in closer and began twirling Mjolnir. “What are you doing?!”

“Something stupid.” he muttered under his breath, hoping he was right in assuming Loki’s vague instruction. The hammer beat in heavy circles above his head, spinning faster and faster until their bodies began to ascend.

“Ah! Thor!” Sif screamed as they rose above the fog that stretched from the gate of the city to the horizon. All sounds of battle had ceased entirely.

Thor marked the location of his other friends by the bare tops of a few trees parallel to where he had risen. Then, without further hesitation, he flew him and Sif in the direction of the gate, landing on the other side in a graceless skid. Sif had rolled a few feet away and was stumbling to her feet, stray hairs falling from her bun as she tried to regain her balance. “What…by the name of Odin… was that?”

Thor stood as well, bracing himself against the stone wall of the city’s barricade and observing the courtyard they had landed in. “I flew.”

“Indeed,” Sif said, leaning against the wall as well. “I—”

“In the name of High Lord Bjarte of Nornheim, put down your weapons! You are under the arrest for entering the city without the consent of the gatekeeper! Is there anything you have to say in your defense?” Thundered the supposed voice of the Chief Guard.

Thor and Sif froze as guards surrounded them, crowds of them spilling into the courtyard through two outer archways.

“What was it that I had said again, Thor?” Sif said, taking out her sword, brandishing the double sided blade. “For Asgard?”
He chuckled, raising Mjolnir, “Save a few for me, would you?”

Sif’s responding laugh was hardly audible through the sounds of crashing blades as Thor went to retrieve the rest of his friends.

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Hel approached the rear entrance to Nornheim’s main city and Loki was surprised to find it unguarded.

Magically, he opened the gate allowing Hel to carefully tread into a main stable area. No horses occupied the space and Loki suspected they were all off near the battle. Darcy’s grip lessened on him as she had been holding tightly the entire way there. “Where is everyone?”

“I am not sure.” He said quietly, pulling back on Hel’s reigns and dismounting.

Darcy jumped down as well, the cat ears on her helm shone brightly in the sun. “Do you think Thor—?”

She was interrupted by a storm of silver armored guards stomping in through the archways and a powerful voice bellowed at them from above. “Halt! You have broken the terms of battle by entering this city! This is a crime worthy of punishment! What do you have to say in your defense?”

Instinctively, Loki moved to stand in front of Darcy, making sure to keep his daggers to himself. A few of the men in the guard held out their weapons and others seemed downright terrified of the half-dead horse behind the dark haired prince. He observed that the commanding voice did not convict him of arrest, hence, he was not the Chief Guard and did not have the right to arrest anyone during war times.

Loki chose his words carefully. “I have come with peaceful intentions to discuss the state of this war with the High Lords of Nornheim.”

A few laughed, including the commanding voice. “And who are you to do that? No. It does not matter. This is war! Set to bring Nornheim the respect and honor it deserves from the capital and all of Asgard!”

Rambunctious cheers radiated from the guards and Loki wanted to go hit each of them on their helms. Was everyone in Asgard truly so petty? “I’m afraid, I must insist.” Loki said coolly. He considered announcing his title, but that could be dangerous also. There were many who would see greater reason to kill him because he was royalty. Even more so, Darcy was with him and she could be taken as a hostage.

Though, he may be tempted to feel sorry for anyone who attempts to kidnap Darcy.

“You insist?” taunted the guard, “Well, you capital black-head, I must insist a challenge for you! If you can fight off my men, I’ll let you go see the High Lords and you may even be able to keep your little friend.”

He impulsively reached back to simultaneously shove Darcy behind him and cover her mouth with his hand before she could say anything. He failed.

“Hey! Why don’t you come and fight me and we’ll see who gets to keep what you little—!” she shouted up to the balcony at which the guard stood and Loki clasped a hand over her mouth to stop the spew of threats.
“As the lady wishes!” he bellowed, “Men, attack!”

Many of the guards looked hesitant to attack at first and Loki could see why. He was young. It was obvious he was not still a child, but he did not look especially strong and he was unarmed. Plus, Hel had surprisingly not run off. Instead she stood behind him almost protectively.

Darcy drew her swords, bending her knees to stand in proper defensive form. “They aren’t coming at us.”

Loki did not draw his weapons. “Sir, I will fight your men if I must, and I am prepared to. However, I do not wish for bloodshed and I believe it would be better suited if I were to speak with the High Lords first. I am already afraid we have wasted enough time.”

There was a grumble of disapproval amongst the men and the Guard spoke, “What is this? Has the capital gone soft? Sending us little fish-bones to see how weak we are! We shall snap you in two!”

There was a roar of approval at the mention of the capital’s injustice and one man surged forth from the line of guards, giving a loud battle cry, his sword raised as if to strike at Loki.

Ready, the prince stepped forwards to evade the swing of the blade, causing the guard to fall frontwards. Hel settled one of her hooves on his back to keep him down. Loki thought it was funny how Hel positioned herself. She obviously meant no violence, but to be kept down by a horse was quite demeaning. It angered the force before him and several more charged forwards.

This time, Loki drew two of his daggers and threw one. It spliced open the knee of one man and landed in the foot of another. The second dagger made its home in the link between another man’s armored leg. He fought off a fourth man with his third dagger while two more charged at Darcy.

He watched her while, for the first time, fear ate at his insides. What if she could not defend herself? What if she dies? What if she—?

Darcy’s swords moved fast and she maintained near perfect form. None of her opponents could bear down on her because she never gave them the opportunity. There was fright in her eyes but determination in her jaw as she moved and soon enough, she had speared the guard through the knee and disarmed the other with undeniable grace. After kicking aside his sword, she gave Loki the tiniest of smiles before turning to the oncoming threats.

As more men advanced and as Loki fought them off, he came to a conclusion: he hated fighting. He hated making men fall to the ground in agony and he hated the look in their eyes when they realized they were at his mercy. There was no pride in striking down men who had not been raised in a palace, making it their duty to train diligently every day. There was no feeling of greatness in showing them his power. His only desire was to go see the High Lords and be done with this mess.

Throughout the fray, Loki refrained from using magic. Nornheim looked down on it even worse than the capital. Making his sorcery known to them would only bring skepticism and dislike upon himself later. He made up his mind to use it only if need be.

Hel did her part as well, biting the shoulders of a few men that got too close to him and Darcy. The looks on their faces suggested that death had taken them between her maws. What a funny notion.

Darcy held her own, but Loki could sense she was wearing down and not just physically. Through her helm he could see the horror in her eyes as a man ran at her and, in pure defense, lifted her sword to stab him through the middle. He fell to the ground in a cry of pain.

That is when Loki decided it was time to call an end to this madness. He drew his final dagger,
holding in front of him loosely. “Take me to your High Lords. I have no desire to wound your men any further, nor does my comrade. We only seek audience with—”

The guard on the balcony no longer held himself as though he was teaching a few naughty kids a lesson. He was caught in a state of both perplexity and resentment. “My men would have healed by now if that were just regular steel. But it’s not, is it?” he focused on Loki as if trying to determine something. “You must be a little Lord then? A commander’s son? Who are you?”

Loki answered immediately. “As you have said, it does not matter. My business is with the High Lords. It is not your place to arrest me and seeing as how your men cannot kill me, I suggest you let me pass before—”

There was a terrified little gasp from behind him and Loki watched in horror as one of the men on the ground drove his sword into Darcy’s leg just as she had done to him. The armored girl sank to her knees, clutching the wound in her thigh, sobbing out in pain.

Loki acted immediately, fury injected into his blood as if through a Midgardian needle. Who did this man think he was? To attack Darcy? His friend? His Darcy? He would pay for that with more than simple pain. Pain was not nearly enough compensation! Driven by pure rage, Loki conjured a set of doppelgangers, each bent into an extremely offensive position with their heads inclined so the horns of his freshly adorned helm challenged him.

The clear *shlick* of several knives piercing that one man’s skull was the most unforgiving sound Loki had ever heard in his life.

He and all his doubles directed their gaze to the guard and spoke together “The High Lords. Now. Or there will be further bloodshed.”

Pure dread plagued the faces of every guard and most of them retreated several paces. Their Officer looked down from his balcony in shock. “Your helm…you’re Prince Loki, Prince of Mischief, Prince of Chaos.”

“Indeed.” He agreed eerily, waving a hand for his doubles to disappear. He knelt by Darcy to examine her wound. Luckily, it had not been a poisoned blade, nor an enchanted one. But she was bleeding heavily and he would need a more advanced healing spell to cure her. He cast a quick enchantment to stop the flow of blood before taking her in his arms. “I will go to the High Lords now and you will make sure that your men and comrades do not attack me. Understood?”

Every soldier gave a curt nod and Loki lifted his chin. “You may go, Hel.”

The horse neighed in a dignified sort of way before trotting off behind the stables and disappearing.

The Officer shouted down at him, “My men will escort you there, Your Highness. My apologies, I did not realize you truly meant no ill will upon us. You are most gracious.”

Loki did not acknowledge his words with any more than a slight nod as he was already walking steadily forwards, preparing for whatever criticism lie ahead as a consequence for stalling the battle with the fog. He only hoped that Thor had killed as few as possible and was already setting out to debate the outcome of this skirmish with the High Lords in council.

After a few spells and looking over the animals, Idun decided her new friends were going to be
Well, the snake may have a few small growth problems in the future and the wolf (she determined he was actually a breed of dog, but she preferred to think of him as a wolf) would be immortal. It would not be unlikely for them to have strange magical capabilities, but if their master was a sorceress it would be no problem.

Idun quite liked the two creatures. They were truly the most adorable things she’d ever had the pleasure of meeting.

They enjoyed cuddling, laying on the floor, and for some odd reason, kept taking the books off her shelves and staring at them expectantly.

It was so rare for Idun to have any company at all. Her most frequent visitor was Queen Frigga, and she hadn’t seen her for at least a hundred years. Though, she did occasionally write letters to Freya who lived in the north.

The animals seemed to also like listening to her talk. The Wolf would sit with his head on her lap listening as long as she rubbed his ears. Occasionally, he even whined in sympathy or licked her thumb. The serpent nuzzled her hair and, after enough books littered the floor, laid across them in a contented state.

She had been telling the Wolf about one of her visits with Queen Frigga. “…and she brought her baby son once, Prince Loki.”

The Wolf’s ears perked up at the sound of the prince’s name and he looked about hopefully. “What? He isn’t here now, silly.”

The wolf whined sadly and let his head settle back into her lap. “Any who,” Idun continued cheerily, “he was such an adorable little thing. He could do some magic, you know. It was quite impressive for a babe.

It wasn’t much. Just little lights on his tiny fingers. But you would like him. I can tell.”

She lit up her own fingers as an example and suddenly the serpent was there, licking her palms. It continued to surprise her how the two animals were so comfortable with magic. It was a most unwelcome sight for most, especially where she had come from in Nornheim. But these creatures seemed genuinely fond of it.

Idun scratched under a piece of the wolf’s armor and her fingers came across something. A strap? It was indeed a collar of sorts around his neck and dangling from the bottom like a necklace was a stamped metal tag in a Midgardian text. “Fenrir.” She read slowly, unaccustomed to the language. She could read it, unlike most Aesir, but only because of constant study of Yggdrasil.

Her brow crinkled and the wolf looked at her in anticipation. “That is your name? Fenrir? It is an Asgardian name yet you are of Midgard? Even so, how did you come to be on Asgard?”

She did not expect any kind of answer from the animals, but in that instant they both perked up, gaze jerking east, the direction of Nornheim. Immediately, the snake began to behave strangely, slithering in a circle with his tail in his mouth. Fenrir acted similarly, only he seemed to be chasing his tail rather than eating it. It was a very strange sight indeed.

“What in the name of Bor…?” she trailed off, entranced as they spun in sync, both wearing obvious expressions of distress.
Instantaneously, they stopped, made eye contact with the other and charged for the door. Idun watched after them, disappointed by their leaving and awed by their characters. She must find out who their owner was. Whoever it was deserved a golden apple so long as they promised to come visit her from time to time.

Loki found the castle entrance easy enough and the men at the gate gave him no trouble as he was flanked by two official guards. They did look at Darcy rather skeptically and with slight bits of concern as she was clutching to his armor and biting her bottom lip.

“Shh, Darcy,” he assured her. “You will be fine. I will take care of you as soon as I can. I promise. I pinky promise.”

“Loki…you used magic,” she said softly. “You killed him.”

It dawned on him, the truth of her words.

Magic. He never truly intended to ever harm anyone with it. How long had he spent practicing in the fields to destroy people? How long had he struggled and worried over his capabilities as a superior fighter? How he had suffered through training, yet found killing so easy when faced in combat. He felt no remorse for the man he killed and that is what scared him.

He did not feel bad for that man whose brain was splayed like horse droppings on the dirt. That guard had attacked Darcy and caused her the pain she felt now. He had hurt her for a ridiculous reason such as honor. He would have killed her for honor. And in that, he would have received none.

“I did.” Loki agreed as they entered the castle and stalked down a lengthy corridor lined with defensive looking guards. He noticed that these ‘men’ were no more than boys, not much older or younger than himself, wearing ill-fitted armor. Oh how low Nornheim had sunk for this useless rebellion.

Darcy squeaked as he adjusted his hold on her and he felt as though a large shard of ice had just stabbed at his heart. “I’m so sorry Darcy. I should have never brought you here….”

“Shut up, Loki,” she mumbled, a fine sheen of sweat on her face as she bit back the pain. “I’m fine.”

“You are not fine,” he argued as they entered a grander foyer where several thrones lined the back wall. Each held a man with shiny new armor, holding out their weapons. Before them, kneeling on the ground and cuffed, were five adolescents and were being spoken to heatedly.


“And his companion?” inquired a man in purplish robes on the far left.

“Of no importance to you.” Loki answered, strolling forwards at the most relaxed pace possible. He would not make them feel threatened. He was young, but he was their prince and this talk was necessary.

“Prince Loki,” greeted the center High Lord and Loki recognized him.

“Lord Bjarte.”
“A pleasure to see you again. I was there for your ceremony. It was quite impressive,” he complimented, and Loki knew that most of his dealings would be with this man. Lord Bjarte was known for his cunning behavior during debates. It was said that he could convince anyone of his perspective in less than an hour.

Loki squared his shoulders, aware that Darcy was still curled up, her face in his shoulder. “Thank you, Lord Bjarte. Though, I wish we had met this time over more pleasant circumstances.”

“I quite agree,” he said airily, folding his hands. Lord Bjarte had a graying blonde beard shaped quite strangely, long braided blonde hair and glittering armor so gold it was almost orange.

Loki could not bring himself to return the small smile. “Forgive me for making requests so soon upon my arrival, but might you release my brother, Prince Thor as well as his friends?”

“I’m afraid not, Prince Loki,” Lord Bjarte sighed. “They resisted arrest after entering the city which went against the battle protocols for this little scuffle between provinces.”

Loki cursed himself. Of course Thor would fight his way through without thinking of the implications. “I see,” he said, looking down at his brother thoughtfully. How would he get them out of this? Fighting was not an option. Well, there was really only one way. “He did so under my instruction. I told him to get into the city as I intended to do in order to hold conference with the High Lords. He was most likely a bit overenthusiastic when the heat of battle tempted him. You know how it can be.”

Lord Bjarte gave a low chuckled, glittering eyes beating down on the dark prince. “Oh yes, I quite understand. But, my Prince, you must understand, the men surrendered and he continued to challenge them. Surely you can see as to why we must insist upon this treatment.”

Loki knew he should have tied Thor to a tree given the chance. How embarrassing. A member of the royal family arrested. Father would not be pleased when he found out...if he found out...

If. If is good.

“I understand, Lord Bjarte. In which case, allow them to be seated elsewhere and we shall speak of it later,” Loki suggested, shooting a quick look to Thor who was shaking with fury, his mouth muzzled.

Lord Bjarte gave the guards a swift nod to take the warriors from the room. “They will be given rooms. Comfortable ones, not cells. I do not wish for your mother to come and give me a lesson on hospitality. I daresay, I would sooner face Gungnir.”

At this, Loki did offer a smile. “Your fears are not unfounded. Now, I must ask for one more thing before we continue our discussion.”

“Would it have anything to do with the pretty little thing in your arms?” Lord Bjarte asked, his voice smooth like honey.

“It would,” Loki replied, his grip tightening on Darcy. “In the presence of the High Lords of Nornheim, I would like permission to heal the wound of my friend.”

One of the Lords in the back chuckled. “A Prince asking permission in his own Kingdom! That’s a good one.”

Loki stiffened, his jaw tightening. “It is customary to ask in Nornheim before performing magic, is it not?”
The Lord quit laughing and paled at the mention of magic. “You’re not a healer. Why would you do that?”

“And you are not a cushion, yet you rest in a chair all day.” Loki stated in the simplest, kindest way possible. A few Lords chuckled, others glared.

Lord Bjarte’s lips twitched. “Please, Prince Loki, tend to your friend. Though, forgive us, we would appreciate if you do it here, so as to not have any unwanted discussion between you two. You are known for being a Prince of Lies.”

Loki grimaced. “Indeed.” And with that, he settled Darcy on the ground and carefully thought through the spells he needed. Quickly, he cast a cleansing one that would remove any dirt or infectious bacteria from the wound. Then, he cast an advanced healing charm that brought her flesh together faster than any other spell could. He had invented it himself after studying with Eir.

Darcy flinched at the pain and made a sound of discomfort at one point. But, ultimately, she seemed fine. She carefully removed her helm and he saw faint bruising on her hairline, probably from someone bashing her helmet. Gingerly, he traced it with his fingertip, letting swirls of gold magic sink beneath her skin and heal the injury. She sighed in relief. “Thanks Loki. Are you okay?”

“I am fine Darcy. I believe you need rest,” he told her letting his fingers roam over her scalp in search of any other bumps or scrapes.

“I want to stay here with you,” she said, taking one of his hands in both of hers.

“I wish that you could stay with me. But that is not my decision,” he chided gently, rubbing his thumb at the bags under her eyes. “You need rest,” he repeated.

Lord Bjarte clapped his hands, “She will have a room! I must ask you, my dear,” he addressed her, “Who could have possibly hurt a precious thing like you?”

Darcy blushed as Loki helped her stand, but he also detected a bit of annoyance in the twist of her lips. “A man I disarmed.”

“And what became of this man? Hm?”

She pursed her pouty lips for a moment, “Loki killed him.”

Lord Bjarte gave her a sympathetic look that contrasted drastically with his cold eyes. “His first kill then? The things we do for love….”

“Loki’s my friend,” Darcy quipped, angling her head in order to make them seem a more equal height. She did not succeed.

“And he loves you nonetheless,” Lord Bjarte pointed out, reaching down to take Darcy’s hand. He kissed it once then gestured for his guards. “You will be treated as royalty, My Lady. We would not wish to upset our young prince any further.”

Loki could taste the mockery. There was very little chance that Lord Bjarte was truly threatened by
him. But this small act did mean something. He was not anxious to continue this skirmish.

Once Darcy was gone, Lord Bjarte glided to his previous position. “She is spirited. Is she very clever?”

Loki paced forwards, arms at his sides. “Quite.”

Lord Bjarte grinned. “Ah, women. Perhaps you are too young to understand the pain they inflict…” he cocked his head to the side, “…or perhaps not.”

Loki stared expectantly, “The skirmish, Lord Bjarte.”

“Ah yes, that nasty business.” He sighed, “I’ll admit, I did not think a rebellion was quite the right approach to the problem we faced. I think you’ll agree with me, Prince Loki, that men do ridiculous things for honor.”

He nodded once, and waited for the High Lord to get on with his statement.

“It was quite a close vote on what we wished to do. It was the first vote ever made by the gathering of High Lords,” Lord Bjarte explained casually. “Well, you can imagine how it went. Some of us wanted to simply challenge Vanaheim to battle over that spot of land but of course, we could not if the capital did not agree to let us use the bifrost. Our options were to either persuade you or win a battle in the terms, that if we won, we would have access to the bifrost.”

This was news to Loki, though it was not surprising. “Clearly, you have lost your battle.”

Lord Bjarte waved a scolding finger. “Oh no. You see, there’s a dreadful fog that has spread over the place. We have heard word back that there have been no casualties. Or, at least, no one thinks so. It’s impossible to see out there, you understand. According to my men it is complete and utter chaos.” He said the last words with clean annunciation, drawing out the ‘s’ in ‘chaos’ till the rest of the Lords gasped in realization.

Loki bowed his head in appreciation of Lord Bjarte’s wit. He wished to convince Loki to let them use the bifrost in order to evade further rebellion. He now had his task. He would prevent this, by any means necessary. “Yes. That was my intention. Do not think Thor had any part in it.”

“Surely this is not bragging, Prince Loki? You do not strike me as one to gloat.”

“I am not. I am merely protecting my brother from any further humiliation.” He said plainly, not daring to move. He liked this. These mind games and this trickery. Perhaps that is why his title is Mischief. He had the propensity for it.

Lord Bjarte sunk into his chair slowly and with great purpose. “Tell us, Prince Loki, why would you do such a thing?”

Loki addressed all of the Lords, beginning to walk the length of the room, speaking to them as calmly as possible. “My Lords, I understand your desires in this war. In the capital, we have been discussing ways to settle this ordeal. You are Lords,” he said simply. “Your people gain honor through your achievements.”

There was a hum of agreement and Loki purposefully did not meet Lord Bjarte’s eyes. “Asgard has not had a war since before I was born. That is quite some time and those who have gained glory in battle are running few.” He admitted, not truly understanding why anyone would gain anything through the slaughter of men, but that was beyond discussion at this point. At the moment, he needed to win them over.
“But the way to win that honor is not by killing those of your own kingdom. Just as the people are honored by the deeds of their Lords, Asgard is honored through the deeds of her people. And there is no honor in hurting oneself,” he almost pleaded, stopping to speak directly at Lord Bjarte. “War will happen. Perhaps not now, nor in the next year, but it will happen. We need not make it from nothing. When the time comes, the bonds between the provinces will need to be strong in order to keep the Realm Eternal’s pride and glory.”

A few of the Norn Lords stared, near speechless. Others looked at their boots. Another seemed to be considering Loki’s words with great care. Lord Bjarte began slowly clapping, something sparking in his cold, expressionless eyes. “Oh, I quite agree Prince Loki. Though, you did not answer my question. Why would you go out of your way to cast such a broad scale spell across our land?”

“To save lives, Lord Bjarte,” he answered honestly. “I understand how Nornheim and many other provinces see magic. I would not have used it lest I was sure it would limit the casualties.”

One of the other Lords interrupted. “Save capital lives you mean! What about your brother, Prince Thor, coming in here with his warriors, killing off all our guards!”

There was a shout of agreement and Lord Bjarte looked to Loki innocently. Loki swallowed the desire to turn all of them into frogs like some Midgardian fairytale. “Thor acted defensively as many of you would. He entered the city on my request to seek audience with the Lords. Upon his arrival over the wall, he was sentenced to arrest. It was natural then, in our wartime state, that he fight. My agreement to the wrongness you accuse him of is that he did not abide by their surrender.”

“He has done wrong!”

“His friends have committed treason of our terms!”

“And he will suffer the consequences,” Loki reminded them. “If not by the Allfather, then by Queen Frigga.”

The Lords murmured anxiously amongst themselves, solemnly knowing expressions on their haughty faces. Lord Bjarte nodded once to Loki. “It seems the Lords agree that Prince Thor’s punishment in the capital will be satisfactory. But I am curious, Prince Loki, if you are so adamant about keeping so many Aesir alive, how do you suppose the capital and the Norns settle their differences?”

Loki was, as the Midgardians say, quick to the punch. “I would suppose that we ought to come to an agreement on our struggle with Vanaheim.”

“Our?”

“Nornheim is a part of Asgard. Hence, any skirmish it was wish another realm is the concern of all Aesir,” Loki clarified.

Lord Bjarte’s eyes narrowed. “You mean to unite us, Prince Loki? Not teach us a lesson?”

Loki smirked, “As it turns out, Lord Bjarte, I’ve found it is better suited to education when we learn things on our own. I would ask that Nornheim agrees to drop quarrels with Vanaheim and send back to the capital three Norn Delegates to further represent this province in council meetings. We cannot solve every issue between Asgard and Vanaheim now.”

One of the Lords barked a laugh. “You royals and your pieces of paper! Sorcerers and your bits of
scrawny magic! Aye! I agree with your verdict on Prince Thor. The lad’s got a lot to learn. But you’re a slippery one. You want something from us with your capital treaties and contracts!”

A few stomped their feet and clapped their hands in approval and Loki kept the heat in his belly at a low. “Lord Erlend, I have no paper before me,” Loki gestured to his empty hands. “I remind you my title is of Mischief and Lies. There may be a reason for that. However, now I speak truth.” He spoke a little louder to make his statement known. “Paper burns, my Lords. Contracts are lies and treaties are broken. But this is a promise. Asgard must stand together and establish this oneness. What we do, we must do for the people and the balance of Yggdrasil. As long as there is growth in the Nine Realms, we will prosper.”

A hush fell over the Lords and in no time at all, three of them had stepped forwards as volunteers to go to the capital as representatives for their province. He shook hands with all of them and took note that throughout the meeting, none had mentioned his age.

Lord Bjarte stood before them, “Let this meeting be adjourned.”

Finally, Loki managed to numb his anxieties and he stood there, stunned at the events that had just taken place. How, by the name of Odin, had he talked his way out of that?

“You have a silver tongue,” said a voice behind him and Loki turned to a very close Lord Bjarte. “Those are very valuable you know, silver tongues. Guard it carefully, Prince Loki, or someone might cut it out and use it as their own.”

Loki attempted to keep his expression clear of worry. He would not be controlled. Not ever. He did what he did for his own reasons. “Thank you, Lord Bjarte, for your understanding.”

The blonde Lord chuckled darkly. “Do not thank me for my empathy, Prince Loki. Thank me for my compliance to the capital.”

They glared at each other for a moment, and Loki suddenly wondered if it was right of him to task the Norns as he had done. Lord Bjarte brought himself to full height, regaining his cheery air. “I suppose you’ll be wanting to go visit your friends now? Will you be staying the night?”

Loki gave a curt nod. “I will see Thor. We will stay for a meal and then we shall depart. Allow us also to send a message to the capital to alert them of our terms.”

“Of course.”

After the conditions of their stay had been discussed, Loki was led off through a stone hallway and to the room Thor and his friends had been sent to. Loki observed, Darcy was not amongst them.

“Loki!” Thor exclaimed upon his brother’s entry. “Have they sent you here as well? How are we to be punished? Damn these—“

Loki held up a hand, entering the room and finding it quite plush and roomy. “All is well. The Lords expect you will be punished thoroughly enough by Mother.”

The golden prince visibly paled. “Couldn’t they just give me a whipping or something?”

Loki did not respond, only walking to stand by the window and remove his helm. “Tonight we will dine with the Norns and three of the Lords will be accompanying us back to the capital where they will serve as additional delegates.”

Thor looked taken back. “Can you do that? Father would—“
“If Father were here, he would make the decisions. But he is not. I am doing my duty to prevent rebellion and in that protect Asgard.” Loki said quietly. He was exhausted and arguing with Thor was hardly helping.

He scoffed, “Protect Asgard? By letting the rebels into the palace!”

“The decision has been made.” Loki turned to his brother, jaw stiff. “The Lords have been most gracious about the matter. We should elicit the same civility.”

Thor bore a most unpleasant grimace, but did not provoke Loki further. “And what is it you suggest we do, brother? Act as though all is well? Dine with them as though we are old friends?”

“I suggest we act as royalty should. We will be polite, gracious company before we head out this evening. They will treat us in kind as honored guests and will be no less than the most esteemed hosts. Ale will be brought to the men in the fields as well as sustenance and then we will return to the palace.” Loki said with an air of finality that no one in the room questioned. He noted the look of disdain on Thor’s face and forced himself to relax. He was still speaking as a prince rather than a brother.

He put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “You fought well. Though entirely uncalled for, you truly are mighty.”

Thor’s jaw unclenched and he grinned at his brother. “So you say. Tell me, Loki, did you know that with Mjolnir I can fly?”

“Indeed.” Loki said obviously, “Didn’t you?”

They all laughed together and Loki bid them farewell to find Darcy and tell her of the outcomes of this ‘battle’.

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Loki knocked on the door he had been directed to in his search for Darcy. A much shaken maid bid him good luck and he did not quite have the energy to ask why.

“Come in,” called Darcy from the inside and no sooner had he cracked open the door was he floored by none other than Darcy Lewis.

“Oh, Loki, it’s you. How did the meeting go?” she asked politely, sitting up so she was almost kneeling on his chest.

He smirked at her and she laughed, climbing off him and offering her hand to assist him in standing. “Sorry. I thought you might be that other lady. She took my swords! And my armor!”

Loki looked his friend up and down to see that, indeed, her swords had been taken away along with her armor and had been replaced by a silver dress. It was a nice dress, floor length and patterned with swirls of pale gold. The bodice hugged her upper body tightly and small chains of jewels draped over her shoulders. Her bun had been let down and hair framed her flushed cheeks and pouty lips.

“So she has. Do not worry, we will retrieve them before we depart this evening.” He sighed, “May I come in?”

She simpered, “Dude, really? You come into my room all the time?”
He quickly looked down the hall in both directions before pushing past her into the room. “You know that, and I know that, but they,” he gestured to the now closed door, “do not know that.”

Darcy nodded knowingly. “Oh yeah. Well, tell me how it went.” She demanded, sitting on a chair and motioning for him to take the one across from hers.

He told her over everything that happened, feeling his muscles relax and mind unwind as he fell into the routine of watching Darcy’s animated face as he recalled political updates. She shook her head once he had finished. “That’s dangerous.”

“I’m aware.”

“You should have tied Thor to a tree.”

“I should have,” he agreed, setting his helm on a table beside him. “But didn’t.”

“You’re not going to cover it up though, are you?” Darcy asked skeptically and Loki made a face. Honestly, he was unsure. Lying to the public of Thor’s deeds was not his first choice. But having a raging murderer first in line for the throne of Asgard was also not an appealing thought.

“Loki…”

“Darcy, I only have a few options. I could either cover it up, tell the truth, or sway the perspective of the people. None are going to go through smoothly.” He told her.

“Sway the perspectives? You mean make murdering a bunch of people look like a good thing?” she asked as if this idea was hardly even conceivable.

He sighed heavily. “Yes. If we can make Thor’s actions seem virtuous or even gallant, it may not be so detrimental to the throne. People will be more willing to accept him as their prince that way. Asgard prides itself in its warriors.”

“That’s not fair,” Darcy argued, standing up. “You’re the one that convinced the High Lords and saved all those lives. It wouldn’t be right—“

“I am a prince, Darcy.” He interrupted, taking her hand and staring up into her wide blue eyes. “I am a prince and what I do, I do for Asgard.”

She squeezed his hand, her eyes piercing straight through him. “You killed someone,” she told him.

“Yes, I remember. Thank you for reminding me,” he sighed, making to withdraw his hand, but she held tighter.

“You didn’t kill him for Asgard.”

“No.” He swallowed thickly, daring to meet her gaze. “I didn’t.”

They continued to stare at each other while Loki’s heart hammered away at his ribs. He had killed for Darcy Lewis. A mortal girl from Midgard meant so much that he would kill for her if not even his own kingdom. He knew it and now she knew it as well.
Dear everyone,
I'm so sorry. I sorta ran into this thing called life and it stopped me from important stuff like fanfiction.

In this situation, I am Loki and my exams were Hulk. But that's all over now, so yay!

So, Asgardian government...
Asgard is made up of provinces, and these provinces are governed mainly by a group of five High Lords. Inside each province there are regions, which are inclusive of Asgardian cities, property, etc.... Each region is looked over by a Lord. The especially big regions are looked over by High Lords. The royals kind of have ultimate rule over everything because royalty.
I hope this makes sense. If it doesn't make a whole lot of sense, you should tell me so that I can further explain myself. Rememebr when I said Asgardian politics were going to get thicker? Yeah, they will for a couple chapters before the rebellion smooths over.

Also, I have OCs. I'm sorry. I had to make some OCs. They won't be here forever. I promise. I don't usually include important OC characters, but...eh. I needed government and I needed Loki to be a BAMF. Don't worry, Darcy's time to shine will appear next chapter. 

There so much BAMFing, it'll be great.

One last thing, I made references.
Hel bites people in this chapter and I kinda got that from Gamf of Thrones. The Hound's horse's name is Stranger and Stranger bites things.
Loki also references the disney Hercules movies. He says "If. If is good." I figured I had better mention my use of that line. Just in case.

Thank you everyone for kudos, comments and bookmarks! I appreciate feedback of all kinds and would very much like to read what you think! Really, it doesn't have to even be about this fic. If you just want to babble about Tasertricks, I would be honored as a fangirling participant.

Thanks again, and the next chapter should be up a little quicker this time. I'm aiming for this weekend sometime!
Chapter Summary

Sif and Darcy are now a broship. Loki comes to a revelation. Frank and Fenrir are tired. Bjarte is horrible. Frigga...is Frigga.

**note**
This chapter is the love child of Q and Game of Thrones with a whole bucket-load of Tasertricks on the side. ;P

Chapter Notes

I had some problems in getting this chapter onto AO3! There were chunks of it missing until just recently when I went back and fixed it! So, if you read through once and something seemed off, it’s because some content got lost on the way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Where’s my armor?”

“Prince Loki has requested that it be sent to his longship.”

“Where are my swords?”

“Prince Loki has requested they be cleaned, polished, and sharpened before returned to you.”

Darcy sighed, not sure she liked being treated like royalty. It was kind of boring. Apparently, ladies on Asgard didn’t do very much accept look in mirrors and sew. But Darcy was really bad at sewing. “Do you have any books?”

The handmaiden that had been assigned to Darcy was tall, had a round face and simple features. But she seemed nice enough. “What does my lady wish to read?”

“You can call me Darcy if you want.” She said, pacing the room and dropping her needle and thread onto her chair. “I don’t really care. I’ve already read most everything about the history of Nornheim and I know you won’t have anything that isn’t biased about magic. Do you mind if I--?”

There was a tap on the door and Darcy nearly leapt from her shoes. “Come in!”

The door opened and there, in the entryway, was a very discouraged looking Sif. “Darcy, do you mind if I join you?”

Excited to have some not-boring company, Darcy excitedly gestured for Sif to come in. “Sure! Maybe we can finally get out of this room. Seriously, I can’t sew!”

Sif quirked an uneasy grin and Darcy noticed she was still wearing her armor. “Do you not like dresses?”
She shook her head, “I daresay, Darcy, I am not a lady.”

“So? It’s still fun to wear dresses.” Darcy pointed out happily, spinning around in hers to prove a point.

Sif crossed her arms. “Why is that fun?”

“Because you can feel breeze on your butt.” Darcy laughed at Sif’s dumbfounded expression. Her hand maiden looked equally horrified and humored.

“My Lady!”

“Don’t love it till you try it.” She said, stretching out her arms. “Anyways, I’m just ready to leave.”

Sif’s brow crinkled, “Is Nornheim not your home?”

“No, it is.” Darcy assured, remembering her fake identity. “But, I promised Loki I’d go back to the capital with him for a few days.”

Sif accepted this answer without skepticism. “So, what is it that you do as a lady? If you do not sew or make tapestries?”

“I read.” Darcy said, falling back on her chair.

“Ah, that is why you get along with Loki so well.”

“Yeah,” Darcy chuckled, gazing around the room. “Gods, I hate this. I’m bored. I’m really bored.”

Sif took the seat across from her, moving the sewing things to the table. “As am I. It would be ill suited for us to spar now after the battle. Or…well…”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, focusing her attentions on the shieldmaiden. “Did you kill people?”

“I did.” Sif cleared her throat, gazing at a spot on the wall. “I’ll admit that it was not my proudest moment. It was not right of me to…It did not feel…Darcy—”

Darcy patted her friend’s hand. “Hey, it’s okay. You weren’t thinking right. You’ve never been to war before. Next time you’ll know the rules. Don’t hit anything that doesn’t hit you first. That’s what my da—Father always says.”

Sif laughed and Darcy saw a tiny little tear peek out from the corner of her eye. “I have never felt this much guilt before. What I have done to them and their families….what I have done to Asgard….”

“Sif.” Darcy cooed gently, cupping the girl’s cheek with her palm. “It’s okay. Well, okay, it’s not really that okay. You kinda murdered a lot of people and Odin is going to be, like, P.O. ed but it’s okay!”

“Is this talk supposed to be making me feel better?” Sif asked, slouching in her seat.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “You didn’t let me finish, jeez. Look, you goofed up but it’s okay because now you’ll make it better. It’s not okay to kill people. But sometimes we have to kill people. This was not one of those times.”

“Darcy, forgive me, but will you shut up?” Sif asked, but there was humor in her voice.
They looked at each other and burst into hysterics. Every time they tried to stop, Darcy would open her mouth to say something and they would start laughing again. Finally, once Sif was holding her ribs on the floor and Darcy was practically beating her knee with her fist, they managed to calm down.


“Indeed. Perhaps—“

There were two sharp raps on her door. “Come in!”

A woman in a plain white dress entered the room, followed by three women carrying golden boxes. “My Ladies Darcy and Sif, it has been advised to me by Lord Bjarte that you be treated like royalty. In which case, it is my duty to prepare you for tonight’s festivities.”

“Isn’t it just dinner?” Darcy asked, rising from her chair and offering Sif a hand to help her off the floor.

The ladies laughed, their voices ringing like wind chimes. “Nornheim has not hosted royalty for at least two hundred years. It will be a great celebration! There will be wine and dancing all night!”

Darcy mentally ran through her knowledge of Norheim’s traditions. “Oh right. It would be an insult if they didn’t host a banquet. But I don’t get why you have to prepare us for anything.”

Sif seemed to have lost her voice and was staring at her toes.

The ladies set the boxes near the large vanity mirror and removed the contents. “We shall have you looking better in no time! After battle you surely must need to bathe and no doubt freshen up! There will be many fine nobles out there, yes?”

The girls gave each other nervous looks. “Uh, okay. If you say so. A bath sounds pretty good right now, actually.” Darcy said, lifting her arm to smell her armpit. Oof, she was ripe. “Yep. Yep, a bath is needed,” she gasped, dramatically coughing at her own stench causing Sif to snort loudly.

The ladies looked at her in disgust. “Right,” said one in a cream colored dress.

Darcy and Sif were guided to a bathing chamber and Darcy thought it looked similar to that one in the palace, only it was smaller and didn’t have an awesome waterfall. Darcy was pretty cool with the whole thing until they started taking her clothes off in front of everyone. “Woah woah woah, what are you doing?”

The lady who had been unlacing her bodice looked at her disbelieving. “I am disrobing you so that you may bathe.”

Darcy flushed from head to toe. “But you’ll see me naked.”

“Have you some disfigurement?” Sif asked, her armor already removed and she was standing, buttekekkid in front of Darcy.

“Nooo.” The younger girl said, looking anywhere but Sif’s naked form. “I…uh…nevermind.” She relented and let the hand maiden shuck off her dress.

Thankfully no one looked at her funny as she stepped into the warm bubbly water of their enormous bathtub. Sif sighed, letting her hair down, the black locks floating across the water. She caught Darcy staring. “I hated you at first.”
“What?”

Sif smiled, walking to the edge of the pool where soaps lie. She lathered some into her hair. “I hated you. On that morning when you walked in and asked to sit next to Thor. I thought you were nothing but another shy, pretty little lady.”

“Well, I don’t know about shy, but I’m pretty good looking.” Darcy teased, taking some soap as well and scrubbing it into her scalp.

Sif smiled, “I hated you even more after what you had done to my hair. Though, I blamed Loki for it.”

“I’m sorry,” Darcy apologized.

“Don’t be,” Sif assured, placing a soapy hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I like it. But, do not tell Loki.”

Darcy smiled back, “Okay. I promise.” She brought herself up to full height to grab a different soap and lather her body, her torso emerging from the water.

Sif gave her a confused look. “How old are you, Darcy?”

Uh oh. “I reached my adolescence a little after Loki.”

“I am older than you, then.”

“I guess so,” agreed Darcy, hoping this would not harm their friendship.

Sif frowned at Darcy’s chest. “You have larger breasts than me.”

Instantly, Darcy brought her hands up to squash those annoying lumps of flesh back on her chest. “No I don’t.”

“Yes you do.” Insisted Sif, giving Darcy a bemused look. “You are ashamed of your womanhood?”

Darcy blushed. She didn’t really talk about these things with Loki because…well…he was Loki. And he was a boy. And he didn’t have boobs. Over the last few months, they had magically started spurting from her chest like insane chest tumors. Only, they weren’t; they were breasts. She’d done a lot to hide the fact, like wearing baggy shirts, and sports bras, and a bunch of other stuff. It was just so awkward to be eleven and a b-cup. “Uh, no?”

“You are.” Sif said pointedly, taking Darcy’s hands away from her breasts. “Why? Most women would be thrilled to develop so early.”

“Why?” Darcy asked obliviously. “This is awful! I hate it! It makes running around hard! It makes hugging people hard! It makes a lot of things really hard.”

Sif coyly raised a brow, “You mean like men?”

Darcy slapped a hand over her eyes, falling back into the water in embarrassment. Sif’s gut heaving laughter was audible from under the surface. She came up, gasping for air. “I hate you.”

Sif was rinsing soap bubbles out of her hair. “I see. Forgive me Darcy, I could not help myself. But truly, you should not feel chagrin over them. I understand the inconvenience, but as you told me on the longship, there is no shame in being a woman.”
Darcy groaned, “I was talking about in a fighty type way. Not in a booby, I mean, breasty type way. It’s amazing to be a girl who fights.”

“I agree. It is also a merit to have amazing breasts,” Sif chided, poking her in the belly.

Darcy stuck her tongue out and splashed Sif in the face. They played in the water and at some point, Darcy leapt onto Sif’s back, throwing her into the water. The handmaidens glared at her disapprovingly. “Lady Darcy! Lady Sif! You are not animals!”

The girls snorted with laughter, eventually pulling their soaking wet bodies from the water. Darcy had not been towel dried by anyone but herself for quite some time now and it was kinda weird to have someone pat down her body. Sif didn’t think much of it, so Darcy didn’t either. After being guided back to their rooms, the handmaiden’s dressed Darcy in a new outfit, the dress was midnight blue, velvety in texture with silk, off the shoulder sleeves.

Sif requested her armor.

“Now who isn’t proud of their womanliness?” Darcy teased, nudging her friend.

She rolled her eyes. “This is different. I am to be a warrior, Darcy. I cannot be a warrior if everyone thinks I am petty.”

“You mean pretty.”

“No, I meant—“

Darcy let her hands fly up, “Come on Sif! I know you like some lady things! No one is going to judge you if you wear a dress for one night!”

Sif’s ears turned red. “How do you know? What if they never respect me again as a comrade!?”

“Because you’re you!” Darcy exclaimed, standing on her chair and making a few of the ladies around her fuss. “You are Sif! You stab things with your awesome sword!” Darcy cried, jumping up and down and one of the maidens fainted.

Sif stared up at her in incredulity. “You are the strangest person I have ever met.”

“Don’t say that, Sif! Be Free! Wear a dress! FEEL THE AIR ON YOUR BUTT!” Darcy shouted at the top of her lungs, throwing her arms out for emphasis and taking her skirt up with them.

Sif took Darcy’s hand and pulled her down. “Fine!” she agreed, “I will wear the damn dress. But just this once, Darcy, and only for you!”

Loki deeply detested festivities. All of them. This one especially. He had agreed to a bath which had gone alright until Thor, Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg showed up and Loki longed for his private bathing chambers. He quickly took his leave and finished readying himself in his room. He combed back his hair, magicked his ceremonial armor into place and sent his worn outfit back to his closet at the palace. Next, he shined his helmet and chose from a selection of cologne that had been laid out for him.
He decided upon one that was almost cool in scent, reminiscent of pine trees in the northern parts of Asgard. He applied two quaint spritz to himself before settling down at the desk his room had been supplied with and conjured numerous books on political theory from both Asgard and Alfheim. He also took time to note his day’s activities in his journal, clearly stating his opinions of what should happen to this battle.

When he finished, he set down his pen and looked down at the green leather book contemplatively.

He wrote nearly everything in that book. Anyone that read it would have prime insight into his life and all the secrets he kept. Decisively, he cast a spell that would only allow either him or Darcy to open it. Anyone else would simply not be able to open the cover.

Just as he completed this task, there was a sharp knock on his door. “Enter.”

The door opened and in stepped a messenger in a tan tunic. “Your Highness, the feast has begun.”

Sighing, Loki stood, fitting his notebook inside his breast pocket. “Thank you. I shall be down in but a moment.” He took measured steps to the door, his cape flaring out behind him.

The messenger was still there. “Have you any accompaniment with you this evening?”

Accompaniment. A partner. A date, as they would call it on Midgard. He felt Sigyn’s key against his neck. “No,” he replied, fitting on his helm. “I have not.”

Giving a slight bow, the messenger left and Loki set down the corridor to the banquet hall. At the entryway, he found Thor in his red cape and shining winged helmet. “Loki.” He greeted solemnly.

“Thor.”

His brother sighed, Mjolnir clutched tightly in hand. “I feel the weight of my actions brother. I have vowed to never spill Asgardian blood again. I daresay, you were right.”

Loki nodded, “Ah, yes. Well, I suppose I am quite extraordinary.” He teased, not used to seeing Thor so somber.

His lips twitched and the blonde prince lifted a hand to clasp his brother’s shoulder. “You are, Loki. If you had not been here today, I fear Asgard would have been much worse off.”

Loki wished deep inside him that Thor had been angry rather than grateful. How was he supposed to respond to that? Being acknowledged for something he did? And by Thor, no less. “Think nothing of it. This task is far from completed.”

Thor gave a curt nod. “I should like to think you will have it under control. I will assist you by any means. Truthfully, you have been most valiant today, even with your tricks.”

“Let’s give us a kiss then? Hm?” Loki jested again and this time Thor truly did laugh.

“Come! Let us feast, Brother!”

And so the festivities began.

Food was set out on platters. Roast ox, pig, chicken, quail, cow, and even bilgesnipe lay before them on platters stuffed with grilled vegetables and warm cheese. Loaves of bread steamed on their boards and juice seeped from the ripe fruits onto the table. Ale and wine flowed in rivers, frequently streaming down the throats of joyous men and giggling women. It was quite the party.
But Loki had business to attend to. Quickly, he sought out Lord Erlend and began speaking of things his type liked to talk of. Bold kills, heavy weapons, strong armor. He spent a great deal of time building up to speak well of Thor in attempt to clear his name. Lord Erlend was Nornehim’s bearded social butterfly. Any good word of Thor would get around much quicker than if he told anyone else.

Luckily for Loki, Erlend seemed to believe him and his tales of his brother’s valiancy. How his fight had been honorable and those who died had surely gone to Valhalla. In no time at all, he was up and introducing himself to the golden prince, offering him a tankard of ale. Thor grinned, slight skepticism in his eyes. He shot a look to Loki who smiled, just a little, as a sign of encouragement.

Loki began to eat, his stomach begging for food after his day’s strenuous activities. He paid no mind to the rest of the party, as he felt no joy in today’s happenings and only wished to return to his chambers with a few books and Darcy. That would be a far better time than…

His mind stuttered to a halt as he looked up to see the most beautiful women in all of Yggdrasil descend the stairs and enter the dining hall.

Mesmerized, he stared at them, trying to identify them by their hair, for one had turned, as if to retreat back upstairs and the other had pulled her back down. This time, when they entered the room, he recognized them and nearly choked on his bread.

They were Darcy and Sif.

But there was something extremely different about them.

Sif…Sif was wearing a dress. He didn’t ever recall a time when Sif wore dress but now she was and she looked…quite fetching. The pale blue fabric was loose around her body and she seemed to be walking in an opaque waterfall, the material swished around her legs when she walked and her hair was styled in a loose braid. It was simple, but stunning.

Darcy was another sight entirely.

Now, Loki had seen Darcy at times when no one else saw her. Like when she was sleeping, or when she had just woken up and her hair was a mess. He saw her when she was studying and her lips pressed together so tight, they disappeared. But he had not seen Darcy look so…divine.

Her hair was free around her shoulders, curly, and parted down the middle. Setting on her head was a circlet, encrusted with diamonds that glittered like stars against the midnight blue of her dress. And that dress…it revealed something to him that he had not known was possible. Well, he had known, of course, but had he thought of it? No.

Darcy had curves.

A woman’s curves.

How had he missed it? Where had he been? When had this happened? Darcy was Darcy! She could not be developing now! That meant she was almost a woman! And Darcy couldn’t be a woman yet! She was his friend and if she became a woman she would be that much closer to dying! He was a very busy prince and he did not have time for his greatest confidant and best friend to die!

He shot one look over to her again, seeing that she was laughing heartily at something Sif had said. And the affects her laughter had on her slightly exposed—

Loki stopped his train of thought, bringing his attention back to his plate. His gaze absentmindedly
flicked to her again and Loki wanted to smack his head on the table.

There was a light tap on his shoulder and he turned to see one of the High Lords sitting next to him wearing silver and purple armor. “Lord Freyar.”

“Prince Loki.” He smiled, giving the prince a wink. “It seems you have more troubles than just those in politics. Here.” He offered the Prince a tankard of ale and Loki accepted it, willing himself not to go out into the countryside in search of Idun as so many had done before.

“You have no idea.” He sighed, wondering whether it would be appropriate to slump forwards and scream into the tablecloth.

Lord Freyar gave him a clap on the shoulder. “She’s very beautiful. What was her name? Lady Dane?”

“Darcy.” He corrected.

“Right. I’d drink that if I were you.” The Lord suggested, gesturing to Loki’s tankard. Tentatively he took a sip.

Under normal circumstances, Loki did not drink. He was allowed, however he’d hate to see his mother’s look of disapproval if he were to become drunk. Yet, now, the drink soothed something inside him and he drank a little deeper. “She is beautiful,” Loki agreed.

“Well, why don’t you go say something to her, Lad? Or, Prince. Sorry, force of habit, I’m afraid.” Lord Freyar excused, his graying black beard hiding his smile.

Loki returned this. “It is quite alright, Lord Freyar. But, you see, my circumstance is more complicated than that. I have no trouble speaking with her.” He explained, taking another sip.

“No?” questioned the lord good-naturedly.

“No,” Loki said, using his hands to talk. “She is my best friend. I tell her of everything and she tells me everything.”

“So, it is this friendship that keeps you from courting her then!” Lord Freyar exclaimed, taking a gulp from his own tankard.

Loki set his empty one down with a thud. “I wish! I wish it was so simple! But, you see, I do not wish to court her! I only wish that no others attempt to win her over and she shows no interest in anyone.” He explained simply. “And just look at her!”

Lord Freyar turned his head to look at Darcy who looked to be scolding Fandral, her full lips in a pout. “I am looking at her.”

“She is turning into a woman.” Loki admitted, sitting back in his chair. “And now I cannot protect her from everything. It was proven today. I cannot protect her from idiot boys, nor blades, nor anything really! I’m a terrible friend!”

Lord Frey chuckled, giving Loki’s shoulder a shake, “Lad, sorry—“

“No, call me Lad. I like it.”

“Alright then, Lad, you sound more like a brother or a father than her friend. Believe me, I am a father, and seeing your little girls grow up is not easy. They get quite feisty.” He claimed.
Loki shook his head. “It is not her attitude. She is the most wonderful converser I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. But how am I supposed to look at her when I know that one day, she will spend all of her time with some Idiot Boy?! That and…well…”

“Well, what, lad?” Lord Freyar asked, taking a large bite of bilgesnipe.

“She is a woman.” Loki said plainly, feeling his cheeks flush. His head was spinning and he felt better than he had all day if not slightly embarrassed.

Lord Freyar looked confused for a second before breaking down into a fit of laughter from his understanding. “You’re attracted to her.”

“What!? No. I am a Prince! I shall not sink so low as to—!” he was cut off by the good Lord Freyar.

“Oh, but you’d like it if someone else was to sink low!” he bellowed and Loki was left with the options of hiding under the table or having a glass of wine.

Wine it was.

“Lord Freyar! How crass! I would not… No! You—!”

“Lad,” sighed the Lord, “You don’t need to be scared of a pair of tits. Forgive my language, I’ve had a bit much to drink.”

Loki could hardly care about language at this point. “I am not scared of breasts!”

The entire table seemed to silence at that most inopportune moment and it seemed everyone burst into laughter and someone began to applaud. “Oh, Odin smite me.”

“Ah, don’t mind them! Come on, keep talking. You’re too tense for someone of your age. You’re too young to worry about all this war business.” Lord Freyar said gruffly, “You’re doing a fine job. More than fine, actually. I was one of the few that voted against any kind of war. Lord Bjarte, he’s all for getting the land in Vanaheim. Of course, you probably knew that.”

Loki nodded solemnly. “I hate politics. I hate them so much. Darcy loves them though. She should have been born a princess.”

“Well, then, why don’t you make her one!” Lord Freyar suggested merrily, his cheeks rosy with intoxication.

Loki sipped his wine, the taste tart on his tongue. “That is a good idea! Only…well…” he reached down the front of his armor to pull out Sigyn’s token. “I have a lady in the palace I care for very much.”

Lord Freyar chuckled, “Look at you! A prince with all of the pretty ladies! She gave you her token, did she?”

“The Lady Sigyn.” Loki said, reading her name, his vision blurring around the edges. “Have you heard of her?”

Lord Freyar clapped his hands together, “Bah! Have I heard of her?! Why, my son, Gudmund, all he speaks of is Lady Sigyn and his desires to court her! He spoke with her while we were last in the capital you see and it seems he is entirely taken with her! However, it looks as though she does not return the sentiment.”
Loki tucked the key back inside his shirt. “I like her. She is not just pretty, you see? Everyone forgets that and I hate it! I hate that they forget that!”

“What do they forget, lad?”

“They forget that ladies are people. They have minds more beautiful than their faces. Sigyn is beautiful, and her face is not even the half of it. Her looks pale in comparison to how she thinks! The same with Darcy! Especially with Darcy!” he ranted, smashing his cup on the table, “That is why I hate breasts! Yes! I am scared of a pair of tits Lord Freyar, I am man enough to admit it! I am terrified of tits because I do not wish to forget about their owner’s minds! I do not wish to be like Fandral, or Thor, or any empty minded buffoon who thinks with their cock!”

Lord Freyar sighed heavily. “I understand what you’re saying lad.”

“But you?”

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “And I have some bad news for you.”

“What?” Loki asked, looking sadly at his smashed glass of wine.

“You’re a man.” Lord Freyar stated, patting him on the shoulder. “You’re going to think with your cock.”

Darcy was having a pretty good time at the party. Though, she was disappointed Loki hadn’t come to talk with her yet and, she would admit, she was feeling too shy to go over and talk to him while he seemed in such heated conversation with one of the Lords.

Sif was also having fun despite herself. She looked awesome and there were lots of boys asking her to dance. But she kept turning them down.

“Why don’t you go dance?” Darcy asked, finishing the ripe pear she had started on only seconds ago. She was super hungry.

“Because,” Sif said, stabbing her chicken breast with a fork, “I don’t want to.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Because I don’t like them.”

“You haven’t even talked to any of them.”

“I still don’t.”

“Why?”

“Because…just because.”

“Because why?”

“Darcy, I’m going to stab you.”

Fandral who was seated next to Sif leaned over to smile flirtatiously. “If it is any consolation, Sif, you look quite fetching.”
Darcy threw her pear core at him. “Shut up Fandral.”

Volstagg chuckled, depositing yet another cleaned bone to his already full plate. “Ah, alas, you cannot win, Fandral.”

The blonde boy wiped a bit of pear juice from his cheek. “Is this the treatment I get? I tease, I get chastised. I compliment, and I get food thrown at me.”

“It was a core. It wasn’t really food.” Darcy pointed out, taking a large bite of bread.

“Leftovers then. Even better,” he grumbled.

Sif sighed and picked up her glass, taking a small sip of the dark red fluid. “Is that wine?”

“Obviously,” Sif said, setting down the beverage. “Why?”

“You’re allowed to drink it?” Darcy asked.

“In moderation.” Sif answered, raising a brow at her friend. “You have your own glass, you know.”

Skeptically, Darcy picked up the drink and took a tiny sip. She quickly recoiled, sputtering and setting down the offensive liquid. “EW. Nasty. Gross. Blegh!”

Hogun, who sat on the other side of Darcy smiled. “I do not like it either. Eating will rid your mouth of its flavor.”

Darcy did as he said, her mouth no longer permeated by such vile content. Shaking out her arms, Darcy stood up and brushed out her skirts. “Well, I wanna dance. Sif?”

The black haired girl choked on her bread and Darcy thumped her on the back a couple of times. “...What...?”

“You wanna go dance? It’ll be fun! I promise! I don’t step on toes…okay, maybe a little bit but that’s okay!” she assured, taking Sif’s hand and dragging her to the scantily populated dance floor.

Fandral sighed heavily, “Three perfectly eligible bachelors before them, and what do they do? Dance with each other.”

Volstagg waved a finger. “I am not eligible.”

“I was talking about Thor,” Fandrall said, looking about for his friend. “Say, where has he run off to? He was right here before Sif came down.”

Hogun’s lips twitched in that knowing sort of way, but he focused mainly on his strawberries.

“Darcy, that is not how this dance goes.” Sif admonished and Darcy purposefully stepped on her toe.

“I don’t care, we’re dancing it this way.”

Darcy put her hands on Sif’s waist, twirling them around in circles and she could taste her friend’s disapproval. “Darcy, this is ridiculous!”
“You love it!” the former squealed, spinning them faster until Sif too began to chortle.

There was a two fingered tap on Darcy’s shoulder and she whipped around to see a boy with dark brown hair and heavy brows. “Excuse me, Lady Darcy, but may I cut in?”

Grin getting impossibly wider, Darcy stepped aside, accepting her hateful glare from Sif with pride.

The only downside was that now, Darcy did not have a dancing partner and the couples on the dance floor really were moving nicely. She wondered if there was anyone there who could teach her the dance. Quickly, she glanced around the room, eyes falling on a boy, not as tall as Loki but taller than her, with blonde hair and silver and yellow armor. She walked over to him curiously.

“Hey, excuse me?”

He looked to her and his cheeks reddened a bit. “My lady.” He bowed his head, taking her hand and she let him kiss it.

“Hi. What’s your name?”

“Halvor, my lady,” he replied. “And yours?”

“Darcy,” she said with a smile. “Sorry, but do you know this dance?”

“Of course! It is most common in Nornheim!” he said cheerily and Darcy threw her arms up in glee.

“Awesome! So, will you teach it to me? I don’t know many dances. And I might step on your feet a little bit.” She trailed off awkwardly, realizing that she was supposed to be a lady and know all of Asgard’s dances.

Halvor did not seem to mind however. “I would be honored if the Lady Darcy were to tread on my feet.”

Excitedly, Darcy took his hand and pulled him to the dance floor where Halvor politely showed her the different movements and steps.

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“I do not understand.”

Loki had his chin on the table and was staring intently at a slice of fruit. “Trigonometry is used, in math, for many different purposes. There are many novice mathematicians who also do not understand the concept of theta. You needn’t worry.”

Lord Freyar shifted in his seat, watching the young prince with curiosity. “I have no idea what you just said.”

Loki sighed sadly. “No…no you wouldn’t, would you?” He sat up straighter. “It seems politics are your strong suit. I must say, your honesty and lack of cunning are quite charming. I suppose it wins you lots of courteous…what is that?” His gaze swept over to the dance floor where Darcy was smiling up at some boy in armor. A Lord’s son? Was that… “Halvor!? Darcy can’t be dancing with Halvor! He is Lord Erlend’s son! Son of a butterfly!”

Lord Freyar chuckled, “Lord Erlend is a butterfly?"

“Hmm, no, you’re right. He’s more like a bee.” Loki corrected, taking his dagger out and spinning
it around his fingers dexterously.

“A bee?”

“Yes! A bee! He buzzes around, taking pollen from that flower to this flower and gets his yellow fur on everyone’s petals. He takes a little nectar from over there and over here and takes it back to the hive where the Queen makes lie-filled honey, sweet like his voice.” Loki rambled drunkenly, stabbing his dagger into a bit of bilgesnipe flank.

Lord Freyar, while at first a bit detached, was now entirely focused. “Who are you talking about, Lad? The Allmother?”

The young prince sat up, instantly offended. “Of course not! My Mother is not a bee! She is… water…or air…She is everywhere and you forget sometimes how much she knows until it is too late…” Loki trailed off, picking up another tankard of ale and Lord Freyar thoughtfully took it away from him.

“Aye. Then who is the Queen of bees?”

“Lord Bjarte.” Loki mumbled, glaring unhappily into his goblet of water the Lord had given him. “He eats the useless dead. He breeds with those faithful to create a nest who will follow him. An army of orange bees with tiny little stingers…” He trailed off, lifting his dagger to examine the cube of cheese at the end. There was something so…familiar….

Lord Freyar shook him of his train of thought. “Loki, how did you come to know all this? What are you suggesting?”

Loki patted the Lord’s arm reassuringly. “Everyone always asks me what I suggest, but they never take my advice. It’s quite sad. I tell Thor my plan, but he doesn’t get it and he kills everyone. I tell Lord Bjarte to stop everything with Vanaheim while he’s probably off writing letters to his correspondents in the next three provinces for support and—“

“Prince Loki, I beg you to hold your tongue.” Lord Freyar said sternly. “I do not know how you came about this information about Lord Bjarte but I know that strange things have occurred. Unlawful things. Dishonorable things…” He stopped briefly to see that Loki was still paying attention. “But you must not tell of what he has done, lest you wish for your head to be amongst those who have wronged him.”

Casting a wary glance down the table, Lord Freyar moved closer to Loki. “Many of the High Lords on Nornheim fear he may be spiking the interest of wealthier families on Asgard.”

Loki frowned solemnly at his cheese cube, wishing to see the spark of familiarity he had before.

“The pedigree of honey does not concern the bee; A clover, any time, to him is aristocracy.” He poked the cube. “That is poetry.”

Lord Freyar cleared his throat, almost impatiently. “Yes, you are quite gifted Lad, but like I said you don’t want to go around saying things like that if you want to stay alive through the night.”

Loki pursed his lips, reaching out to take a sip from Lord Freyar’s wine glass. “To be alive—is Power.” The cheese was white and there was a pink spot of juice on the side from the strawberry it had been sitting next to. “That is also poetry. Emily Dickinson.”

“Loki, is your mind addled so much that you cannot hear the words I am saying?” Lord Freyar complained.
Loki’s gaze flicked up to Darcy and Halvor who were now dancing quite well. He could not tell if she was in immediate danger or not. “I have heard you quite plainly, Lord Freyar. However, I must remind you that while Lord Bjarte is Queen of bees I am something much higher.”

“And who might that be?”

“The beekeeper, obviously.” He said, standing up far too steadily for being so heavily intoxicated. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I must ask Darcy a question concerning quadratics and the dynamic functions of a cube.”

Lord Frey watched, amazed, as the dark haired prince strolled away, not even stumbling as he made his way to the edge of the table where he promptly stopped in his tracks and held up his dagger, a look of pure bewilderment on his face as he stared at the cube. It looked as though he had just found unlimited power under his boot soles.

With one last glance at Lady Darcy, the Prince of Mischief made for the stairs, dagger held firmly in hand.

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Thor, in all his days spent sparring, laughing, talking, eating, drinking, and arguing with Sif, had not once seen her in a dress.

It was not that he thought of her as a man. That was not quite right. She spoke all too frequently of her femininity and unfairness in her desired vocation. Yet Sif had never quite been a lady to him. She was not someone who struck him as outwardly beautiful and perhaps that was because he spent so much time with her.

Now, watching her walk down the stairs of Nornheim with Darcy…he did not know how to think…let alone what to think. She was magnificent. From her black hair to silver shoes, every inch was a marvel.

And he hated it.

He hated that now, every boy, every man and woman that had ever scoffed at her armor and swords, supposedly too heavy for a woman to wield, all of them who had put her down because of her dreams now stared in awe. It made him shake with rage. Even Fandral’s remarks upon the change were disturbing even though he had never truly shunned her hopes.

He left the table without excusing himself, finding, for the second time that day, searching for Loki. There was something oddly calming about his brother he was ashamed to admit he had never seen before. Loki, while still effeminate in his styles of fighting and magical abilities, was not a weakling. He had acted as a King in Odin’s stead, saved him and his friends on Nornheim soil and slyly helped to alleviate the wrongness he had done.

Though, as true as these things were, Thor found himself even more shockingly, jealous.

He was resentful of Loki because for some reason, his brother seemed to have it all. He had won the affections of the most desired young woman in the realm. He had devised a battle strategy, saved them politically, and done just about everything else that a Prince was supposed to do. And still, he wished only to converse with his brother, the child with no problems, on his current state.

“I am not scared of breasts!”

Thor turned his head sharply at the sound of his brother’s voice.
There was no possible way his brother - refined, cautious, polite Loki - would ever say such a blundering thing.

And yet, there he was, red in the face, and speaking rather excitedly to a humouredly attentive Lord.

The golden prince could not help the chuckle that broke his scowl. Loki could typically be described as a lot of things. Drunk was not one of them. Perhaps he would not bother him now. Perhaps he would instead go spar with Fandral or Hogun, or even go back to his rooms until it was time to leave.

“Pardon me, Prince Thor?” called a voice and he turned to face the Commander of the Einherjar. 

“Yes?”

The armored man gave a slight bow, “The men, I’m afraid, have indulged a bit too merrily in Nornheim’s hospitality. I am not sure it would be wise for us to fly the longships back to the capital until morning.”

Thor flicked a casual glance at Loki who was spinning a dagger around his fingers so rapidly, the blade could hardly be seen before sharply stabbing the piece of meat in front of him and glaring at it with wide eyes. He supposed it would not be in the best interest of Asgard to ask Loki about the situation at hand. “We leave in the morning. Have a message sent to the Allmother.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Thor dismissed the Commander and was about to go sit down again when he saw the utter impossible.

Sif was dancing.

With a Boy.

He recognized the face. Brown hair, heavy eyebrows, silver armor with purple accents. Gudmund Freyarson.

He felt his face contort with anger and unprecedented rage. Who, in his right mind, would dance with Sif? Why, Gudmund may be older than him by a year or two, but that was no matter! He was a prince! Why would Sif even accept that request?! Was she smiling!?

Sure enough, there she was, blushing like a Lady and sharing a look with Darcy over her partner’s shoulder.

Before Thor knew it, he was standing behind the Son of Freyar, cool as could be with words boiling on his tongue, dying to be said. “Pardon me.”

They stopped talking and laughing as Gudmund turned to him. “Of course, Prince Thor.” He said with a smile and a bow, bending down to press a kiss to Sif’s hand. Thor did notice how he lingered there for a moment before retreating.

Sif was smirking at him. “What do you want, Thor?”

“Is that any way to address your Prince, my lady?” he spat, crossing his arms. How dare she even think about—
Her black brows came together in an angry knot. “I am not a lady, Your Highness.”

“Oh, you aren’t? Then what is this?” he asked, feigning curiosity and gesturing to her gown.

Sif’s cheeks burned hot with fury and she balled her fists at her sides. “I am within my rights to wear a dress, am I not?!”

“I should think so! Ladies wear dresses, do they not?!” he baited her further, hoping to draw some fury out of his friend. He wanted Sif to get angry, that way everyone would see she was not some girl that ran around in a dress. She was a warrior.

She shoved past him, roughly pushing him aside as she fled to the steps. Thor followed, the bitter resentment in his veins far from sated. “Are you running away, Lady Sif?!”

She stopped halfway up the white staircase to turn on her heel and glare down at him. “I am not a Lady!”

“You could have fooled me.”

“Of course I could have. You are an idiot.” She spat, lifting her skirts to take continue on her way.

He would not be deterred, following her up the stairs. “And her bark is worse than her bite! Are you also going to now ask men to raise swords for you? Give them your token while you sit with a needle and—”

Sif moved quickly, grabbing a sword from the sheath of a nearby guard and directing it swiftly at Thor’s throat so it hovered just above his skin. Her eyes flashed with hate and her long dark lashes dotted with tears. “I. Am. Not. A lady.” She repeated giving him one last shove before tossing the sword at the guard’s feet.

Thor watched her walk away, at a loss for words.

“Smooth move.”

He whipped around to see a very cross looking Darcy, her arms crossed defiantly. “What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me! That was mean! Why did you do it?!” She asked accusingly. He opened his mouth to speak, but she stormed past him as well. “Never mind. I don’t want to hear you say it.”

She breezed past him and he took note that her hair smelled like flowers. “Lady Darcy…..”

“You know,” she said, turning around at last minute, “I read this book once where this guy, he said something rude to his wife and then he had to get her flowers and chocolate to make it up to her.” She gave him a half smile and reached up to pat his arm. “You’re going to need a lot of chocolate.”

“The Tesseract.” Loki muttered to himself enthusiastically, pacing his rooms and messily scrawling on a sheet of paper before pinning it on the wall near several other notes he had made that night.

Another thought ran through his head and on the opposite wall he posted a rough drawn picture of what looked like Lord Bjarte’s seal. “Ah, yes! It’s all coming together now…of course…no no. Darcy!” he glanced about his room, searching for Darcy. Funny, she was usually there when he was thinking about the Tesseract.

Just then, Fenrir and Jörmungandr burst in through his open window, both damp and covered in
wet leaves.

“Jörmungandr! Fenrir! There you are!” He exclaimed briefly before turning back to his notes and holding up his dagger with the cube of cheese on it. “The Tesseract….” He smiled widely and they stared up at him tiredly.

“The Tesseract is powerful.” Loki began, pacing the floor and scrawling hastily on a sheet of parchment. “It is so powerful that it will affect the world round it greatly! If I could create a spell for detecting spikes of magical influence - no such exists currently, I have searched - then we may be able to find it!” he threw his sheets into the air in amazement.

“I shall create the spell! It will be quite easy, I am sure. And Darcy—?” he checked his room for her, but was confused that she was not there. “Where could she be? Fenrir? Jörmungandr? Have you seen Darcy?” he asked his freshly returned pets. But when there was no answering whine or hiss, he was forced to search for them as well, finding them tucked away in his bed.

He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “How do they expect me to find the Tesseract like this!?” he sighed, “Never the matter. I must simply continue to…Ah!” he came to another revelation and hastily stuck another note to the wall, not sure exactly what language he had written it in.

“It is almost an illusion! Don’t you see Jörmungandr? It is an illusion! Where else could you hide the Tesseract?! It gives off such power it would have to be in the most freezing temperatures with just the perfect amount of pressure on it to mask the aura it would give off!” he waved his hands, clumsily conjuring more paper and ink.

“This is wonderful. Darcy--!” he paused, “She is still not here, is she? Damn. I wonder the time…? Well, we most certainly cannot stay the night! Darcy is…not a bee, is she? No, she could not be one of Lord Bjarte’s larvae. Midgardians…there’s so many of them and they work so well together sometimes. Each has their own fascinating little culture. Like ants.” He snapped his fingers, “There! Bees cannot control ants, Fenrir!

“You see, I am a terrible friend really.” He explained, between shattered murmurs of magical anomalies and strange wavelengths in nuclear energy. “I have put her into a hive of bees. I swore to protect her and now look at me!” he exclaimed, smacking another piece of paper to the wall and he observed his series of functions with interest.

“I need her here with me now.” He said quietly, quill scratching on paper fervently. He stopped momentarily to stare confused at Lord Bjarte’s seal.

“He was right, you know?” he asked no one in particular. “I hate him and all I want to do is get Darcy away from him. But he was right.”

Sif was much more comfortable in the linen pants and shirt she had been given to sleep in than her dress. Though Darcy had been onto something with the dresses, the breeze on her behind was quite pleasant.

Now, she was curled up in the other girl’s bed in the dark, whispering over a pillow.

“Thor is stupid.” Darcy said plainly, her brown hair a curly mess around her head.

Sif nodded, burying her face into the cushion between them. “I know. But he is my friend.”

“He’s a crappy friend.” Darcy sighed, wiggling beneath the sheets. “Are you going to spend the
night in my room?"

“Do you mind?” Sif asked, unsure as to why she was whispering. They were the only ones in the room.

“Nope,” Darcy responded, moving around a bit more to get comfortable. Sif hoped she would not do so the entire night.

They lay in silence for a few seconds before Darcy had to speak again. “Soooo, that guy you were dancing with…?”

“Gudmund.”

“Yeah, do you like him?”

“He is fine with a greatsword from what I hear.” Sif remarked vaguely.

It was dark, but Darcy’s eyes glowed with a smirk. “That seriously tells me nothing.”

“Agh.” Sif fell back into her pillow. “No.”

“You do. You like him.”

“Darcy…”

“You loooove him.”

“No. Darcy.”

“You want to put your face, on his face and go smoochie poo.” Darcy giggled hysterically kicking her legs and stirring up the covers.

Sif reached over the pillow to direct a punch at her arm but it wiggled out of the way just in time for her knuckles to make contact with a soft bit of flesh on her chest.

“OW! MY BOOB!” Darcy cried, clutching her right breast and rolling off the bed. “I mean, breast.”

Sif sucked in a breath of air through her teeth, trying to avoid laughter. “Ooh, sorry. I would be lying if I said you did not deserve it.”

“I think you bruised my mammary gland,” Darcy mumbled, standing up and looking down her shirt.

“I think you will live,” Sif said with a smile as the short girl gingerly laid her body back down in bed, cupping her breast.

“My kids won’t when they starve because they don’t have any milk,” she complained.

Sif laughed. “Oh gods, you whine worse than Volstagg when he so much as stubs his toe.”

Darcy cracked a grin as well, snuggling back up to her pillow. “So, you’re in love then?”

“Don’t make me punch the other one,” she threatened and Darcy protectively brought her hands up to hold both her assets.
“You wouldn’t.”

They giggled and Sif could not remember a time when she had actually let out the tittering sound. It was not even unpleasant. Darcy was strange. She said strange things and acted in strange ways, but she was one of the most wonderful people Sif had ever met. She was a warrior, but a noble one. She was a lady, but was not petty or completely polite. She was Loki’s friend, but not a horrible person. Surprisingly.

It was a wonder to Sif how one little lady could be so incredibly confident and forward in everything she did. Throwing pear cores at Fandral, dancing with another woman, asking a man to dance with her…Darcy was different. But Sif liked her. Perhaps she would stay in the capital and pledge herself to Odin as well.

“Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever…?” Sif trailed off, suddenly shy. “…you know…?”

“What?” Darcy asked eagerly, sitting up.

“Kissed anyone?” Sif finished, curious as to if Darcy would have accepted any offers for courtship. No doubt she had received a few requests. Grant it, most parents did not allow courtship until later years, but perhaps she had.

Darcy made a face and shuddered. “One time. But it was awful.”

“Was it Loki?” Sif asked, ready for any information about the mischievous dark-haired prince.

“Ew.” Darcy remarked, her cheek in her hand. “No. It was this other boy. I thought we were friends but then he wanted to da…I mean…court me and he kissed me and it was gross.”

“You did not like it?”

“No! He licked my mouth!” Darcy exclaimed, breaking their whispered conversation with a shout that made Sif jump.

“Was it Fandral?” Sif inquired, remembering the first time she met Darcy and Fandral had ‘licked her hand’.

Darcy’s unladylike gagging noises were enough to answer her question. “That’s gross. Who would want to kiss Fandral?”

“I’ve no idea. I mean…he is Fandral.” Sif shook her head and both girls shuddered together at the horror of kissing Fandral.

After another few seconds of silence, Darcy looked to Sif. “Why are you so interested in kissing?”

“No reason.” She answered too quickly. “I just…I have never kissed anyone.”

“Lucky you.”

Sif chuckled, bringing herself back almost immediately. “Darcy, I’m being serious. I have never had any desire to court or be courted. I do not speak with any ladies at all really. To most, I am not…an option.”
Darcy frowned in sympathy. “And how does that make you feel?”

“Confused,” Sif sighed, rubbing her eyes. “I have never wanted anything but to be a warrior. To defend the Nine Realms as a woman and bring glory to Asgard. Yet, today… I am not sure. It was nice to have people think I was... more, I suppose.”

Darcy tapped her chin. “It was nice to have people think you’re pretty?”

Sif shrugged, “It is not only that. I have to fight, all the time and not just in the physical sense, to make people believe that I can be a worthy warrior. I am a fighter at heart. Tonight, I did not have to fight anyone.”

“Well, if you don’t count Thor….”

“Darcy. Go to sleep.” Sif sighed exasperatedly, covering her face with a pillow.

Darcy snuggled deeper into her covers, giggles muffled by the sheets. “Okay. You go to sleep too. We have to wake up in the morning and Loki can’t even walk straight when he’s tired. I don’t know how he is at driving longships.”

Compliantly, Sif laid down as well, wondering idly how Darcy knew Loki was tired in the mornings. Perhaps he told—

“G’night Sif. Love you…” Darcy yawned, splaying her limbs out like she was attempting to touch all four corners of the bed.

Without thinking, Sif smiled and responded in kind, too pleasantly sleepy to stop the easy words from sliding off her tongue. “I love you too. Sleep well.”

Darcy woke up bright and early, per usual. Only this time, she woke up with her body half thrown across Sif’s and she had left a small spot of drool on the girl’s firm stomach.

Sif was still fast asleep, and Darcy noticed she slept on her back, her shoulders still managed to look stiff even while she was resting.

Quietly as possibly, Darcy slid out of bed, walking around the room to find any clothes that had been left behind. The hand maidsens from before told her that they would be back to dress her in the morning. Of course Darcy had requested her armor and of course, it had been refused. On the bright side, her swords now sat in a chair in the corner of the room.

Underneath her linen white pajamas, she supposed, was the Asgardian equivalent of a bra. It wasn’t quite a corset, but it did lace in the back, came down to about mid-stomach, and held her in place when she walked around. She picked up her swords, admiring how the dull early light caught the delicate leaves on the pommel and how the brown leather of the belt made it all that much more beautiful. Smiling, she belted them on over her pajamas before exiting the room in search of Loki.

She had missed him last night and she felt odd. Usually, after they returned from an adventure, Loki wanted to talk about it and they would spend hours poring over everything that happened, teasing and laughing until she was too tired to continue. But he hadn’t even looked at her last night, had he? Was he upset? She remembered the man he killed and shuddered at the memory of the daggers going through the his head.
Maybe he was upset about that.

Whatever it was, Darcy was worried about him. She came here to make sure that Loki didn’t get hurt, and by Odin, that’s just what she’d do.

She stalked the hallways barefoot, creeping around unsuspecting hand maidens and picking grapes off trays being sent to people’s rooms early in the morning. Apparently, some people in Asgard ate two breakfasts. Darcy knew that Loki could eat a lot, but he always got distracted when she brought him food. He ate pizza rolls okay though, because he didn’t have to stop reading or writing to quickly eat one. But sometimes she was apprehensive of his eating habits. She would make him eat more in the future.

After sneaking under a tablecloth and scampering up a few flights of stairs, Darcy was sufficiently lost. She had meant to go find Loki’s room, only, she had no idea where it was. Thoroughly scouting the lengthy and decorative stone corridors, Darcy considered asking one of the bustling maids for directions, but she was horrified one of them might make her go get dressed in something that wasn’t her armor.

As she walked, Darcy practiced her form. Loki told her that a swords-woman should be light on her feet and be able to run as quickly as a sprinter, whilst still making no more sound than growing grass.

She grinned in memory, almost dancing her way up another flight of stairs when she passed a rather peculiar door. Drawn to the strange entryway, Darcy examined it with open curiosity.

Standing slightly ajar, the white, thick wood was adorned with a large emblem above the door handle. The ornament was a golden bee, encircled by a yellow ring. It was quite plainly an Asgardian Queen Bee because of the shape and number of wings. But what drew her attention was the stinger. It protruded from with emblem in a tiny orange jeweled peak, threatening to deliver a prettily candied death to anyone who dare turn the handle to enter.

Luckily for Darcy, the door was already open, so she didn’t need to put her hand anywhere near the bee when she pushed her way into the room and gasped.

There were books.

Books everywhere.

Immediately, she hastened to the nearest shelves and searched the spines for interesting things she hadn’t already learned. Maybe there were records of Nornheim’s court cases or—

“Typically, when one enters a room that isn’t theirs without permission, a whipping may be executed. However, today, I will make an exception.”

Darcy froze at the honey sweet sound of a familiar voice.

There, sitting in a plush armchair near the window, was the High Lord from yesterday, the one with the oddly braided blonde beard that she had spoken to just briefly before his guards took her to a room.

He stood; his golden armor was gone, replaced with more casual clothing like the kind Loki wore while they were together in her room. His eyes were not sharp, but rather extremely murky, hiding terrible things beneath his blue irises.

Darcy found her voice, mind racing for something to say. “The door was open. You should close it
The Lord, what was his name? Bjarte? Lord Bjarte smiled what most would deem politely, but there was something cruel that ebbed in the corners of his mouth. “Right you are, My Lady. You see, I had been hoping to meet you. Loki happened to mention that you were quite bright. It was no great miracle that you should stumble onto Nornheim’s greatest archive before the sun has risen.”

She met his eyes, deciding that his nickname should be ‘Weird Beard’. “Why did you want to meet me?”

Lord Bjarte’s smile deepened and he stood, gesturing to the chair across from him on the other side of a square table Darcy had not noticed before. “Now now, before we start asking all of those pesky questions, I believe we have not been properly introduced. I am High Lord Bjarte Hagenson of Nornheim.”

Darcy lifted her chin just a bit to compensate for their height difference. Even though he was all the way across the room, she felt it necessary to assert some kind of power. She did not like this Weird Beard and she did not intend to let him get to her. “I am Lady Darcy of Nornheim,” she told him blandly, walking across the room to take a seat in the plush yellow chair he had motioned to previously.

Weird Beard’s smile did not break as something disturbing flashed in his eyes. “Is that so?”

Darcy nodded once, keeping her gaze steady on the Lord. What did he want? Who was he? How did he braid his beard so perfectly? “Yep.”

“What is your house, Lady Darcy? Who are your parents? Where did the little prince pick you up?” he asked, folding his hands in front of him.

Darcy’s glare traveled across the shining hard surface of the table, glowing in the meager daylight to Lord Bjarte’s eyes. “None of your beeswax, Lord Bjarte.”

She nearly laughed at her own joke. She always thought it sounded ridiculous when kids in her class said ‘beeswax’ instead of ‘business’. But, in this case, it seemed kinda funny.

“Well, you see, Lady Darcy, unlike most of the honor-seeking, pig headed fools that bounce around Nornheim with their titles as defense, I am far cleverer.” He said softly and Darcy listened ever so carefully. “Many people in Asgard are dubious of the dark Prince Loki and I can understand why. He is intelligent. Even at a young age he knows his way around the courthouse and the council. He knows what to say, how to say it, and why to say it. Yet…” he trailed off to glance out the window.

“What?” Darcy inquired leaning off the edge of her seat.

“…They fear him because of his silly magic tricks.” Lord Bjarte chuckled. “They would prefer that Prince Thor showed the same virtues as his brother. But he is too much like the rest of them.”

Darcy pressed her lips together, her heart quickening. Was it wrong that she was having fun? “Are you scared of Loki?”

“Me? Scared?” Lord Bjarte asked innocently, placing a hand over his heart. “A fair question. No, I do not fear him yet. But when I do, and yes, Lady Darcy, one day I will fear him, he will not be well off.”

Darcy was perplexed. This weird bearded Lord Bjarte was fascinating. “But you wouldn’t be afraid of him because of his magic.”
“Of course not. Magic is not something to fear, Lady Darcy, it is the wielder. I face a much graver challenge,” he said calmly in just the barest of whispers.

“What is it?” Dary asked, not bothering to hide her curiosity. She wanted to know. She wanted to figure out this Lord Bjarte person. She had the vaguest notion that if he was scared of Loki, he would try to hurt him. And she would not let him hurt Loki.

“Secrets,” Lord Bjarte said simply. “Loki is already stacking his life full of them, I can tell. There’s something about how the secret keepers walk, and talk, and watch you. They can tell when you’re lying and they can sense when you are weak. He, I’m afraid, is slowly becoming the most fear striking person in the Nine Realms.”

Darcy cocked her head to the side. “The person with the most secrets? You can’t know who has the most secrets in the Yggdrasil. They’re secrets!”

Lord Bjarte waved a finger. “Ah, but I do. Queen Frigga is quite terrifying. And even after all these years, I still do not know any of her clandestine whispers.”

Darcy went to argue, but stopped. She’d only met Loki’s mom once, and she seemed pretty nice. But, from what Loki said, his mother was akin to some all-knowing, all-seeing eye into everything. “What does that have to do with Loki?”

Lord Bjarte grinned impishly, his hands coming together in a short clap. “Well, you see, the Prince has brought his biggest secret before me. Forgive me if I cannot be just the slightest bit curious.”

Darcy thought fast. Oh no! He knew about her. She just had to keep calm. “Yeah? Well, you caught me. I’m Loki’s big secret which is why we go everywhere together and he walked into a hall full of Lords carrying me, just to make sure that no one found out about me.”

Lord Bjarte raised a brow at her blatant sarcasm. “And the Lady has a mouth. Loki has taught you some sort of defense after all. Not that swords aren’t useful, but they won’t keep you alive nearly as long as your tongue will if used properly.” He sat back in his chair. “I may be plain with you, Darcy, yes?”

“Alright.”

“You are not Asgardian. That much is clear. You are not of Nornheim nor any other Asgardian province. I do not know if you are a short spy from Vanaheim or a pretty dwarf, but I assure you, it would not take me long to find out.”

Darcy tapped her chin pensively, surprised that she was not more frightened. There was only the undying and itching inquisitiveness toying at her mind. “Why don’t you find out then?”

Lord Bjarte laughed a deep brutal bark that lasted no less than a second. “Oh, that is the question isn’t it?” He stroked his beard once. “Some call it stupidity, but I call it opportunity. It is not necessary that I know immediately. It would be wrong of me to waste such an asset so early on.”

Darcy tapped her chin, wishing she had her glasses. Weird Beard wanted to use her against Loki? “Okay. Why are you telling me all this? I could just go tell Loki.”

“Of course you could. And then he would never let you visit Asgard again. That would be of no use to me. So, you see, I have a gamble.” He smiled, folding his hands before him.

“I’m too young to gamble,” Darcy said starkly.
Lord Bjarte chuckled. “It is not a matter of age, it is a matter of cleverness,” he chided, snapping his fingers. In a swirl of orange magic, a board appeared on the table, followed by several black and white pieces.

She stared down at the table game that had just appeared on the table and she sought quickly to identify it. The board was square with 9 by 9 squares checkered across the surface. There was a tall white shapely piece in the center surrounded by shorter others and sets of four pieces off to each side of the board. Darcy recognized this game. She had asked Loki about Asgardian board games not long after they met and he introduced her to every single game he knew.

This had been her favorite.

It was a strategy game called Hnefatafl.

The rules were simple. One person was the white pieces in the middle and another was the black pieces on the outside. The eight white pieces surrounding the tall shapely one were defense and they were called Varins. It was their job to protect the King, who sat in the center of the board.

The black pieces on the outside of the board were called Norns and it was their job to attack and kill the King. Each one had similar movements to that of chess pieces and typically, when she played the game with Loki, she was always the black team.

Lord Bjarte noticed her gaze. “What do you say, Darcy? A gamble then?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “What do you want if you win?”

“If I win,” he began, tapping the table with his fingertips, “I want you to tell me your full name, where you are from, and how you came to be acquainted with Prince Loki. I want a challenge, Lady Darcy, as well as the truth. You will tell me everything I wish to know about him,” he ended with a slight twinge of venom. “And what will you have? Hm?”

Darcy considered her words very carefully. “If I win you can’t tell anyone in Yggdrasil about me. You can’t tell them where I’m from, or any of your theories about me. Even if you come up with the truth somehow, you can’t tell them that either. You can’t use me to hurt Loki.”

“So very protective.” Lord Bjarte’s eyes narrowed. “You seem confident for facing a Lord.”

Darcy smirked, “You seem confident for facing me. Varins or Norns?”

“Norns.” He answered not breaking his gaze from hers. “If you don’t mind, I do like to put a time on it. In five minutes, the sun will look as if it is balanced atop that eastern mountain’s peak. Play quickly enough to be done by then, and I may let you leave Nornheim with all your wits about you.” His tone did not change from its honey-sweet glide.

Darcy nodded once, attention fixed on the board and gesturing for him to begin.

Hurriedly, Darcy devised a strategy. She maybe had five minutes to finish this game and she wasn’t about to lose to some Weird Beard. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest and she bit back her panic.

What would Loki do?

She thought back to her sword lessons. Loki told her to look at her opponent. What did she know about Lord Bjarte?
First, he had a weird beard. That meant that he obviously had bad taste in facial hair styles and was overly confident in himself.

Second, he admitted his worst fears to her not minutes after they met. No one just admitted their worst fears. It puts them in a position of vulnerability. Of course, Lord Bjarte seemed proud, he wouldn’t do that, would he? Not unless he knew something she didn’t. He thought he was smarter than her and he wanted to put her to the test.

Third, Lord Bjarte could use magic and the rest of the High Lords were not scared of him. Which meant they either didn’t know, or they trusted him completely. The latter was not very likely and that made Weird Beard a liar.

So who was she facing? Lord Bjarte, an overly confident, testy, liar.

He was going to cheat at their game.

In a whirl of hands and quick pushes of pieces, Darcy played Lord Bjarte with all she had.

His Norns moved around the board like bees, lazily buzzing about until the last possible moment. Each piece dove at her king with unrelenting force only to halt when met with one of her Varins. All the while, Lord Bjarte kept cool as a cucumber, batting off her defensive pieces like they were nothing until she was blocked in from two sides. He looked at her smugly.

Darcy cursed herself. She learned that detecting sorcerers’ cheats were ridiculously difficult. Loki could cheat so wonderfully, it took her twice the amount of effort to deceive him. “Tuichu.” She said, taking her King down one of the two paths of escape.

She met Lord Bjarte’s eyes, aware that the sun was now peeking up over the mountain. Only a few minutes left and he was cheating. But how?

Some people may look to the board for answers, but she knew, everything she needed to know about winning the game was in Lord Bjarte’s mocking glare.

He moved one of his Norns, she moved one of her defensive pieces into a cynical position.

His eyes flicked down for just the barest of seconds and Darcy saw them glimmer with orange light. Not the kind cast by the sun, this was magic. When he moved his next piece to block her King’s last escape, Darcy’s fingers itched to move the piece that would let him do it while defending her King from a second, well disguised attack that would not, and could not, hurt her as terribly as that last blockade would. The overbearingly sweet taste of honey was thick on her tongue.

Magic.

Weird Beard was influencing her choices. That’s how he was cheating.

Four minutes.

Quickly, Darcy reworked her strategy from one that followed the rules, to one that would openly, quite clearly, break them. But, she had learned, if she never said anything or acted like it was wrong, she could get away with it.

Openly, Darcy moved a piece four spaces to prevent the blockade and open up her king for attack. When Lord Bjarte smiled at her obvious move, Darcy knew she had gotten away with her deception. He brought another piece forwards to an attacking position before her King.
Three minutes.

“Raichi.” Darcy said, moving her King down a path and away from the line of attack, leaving Bjarte’s Norn to be taken by her defense.

This time, Lord Bjarte looked to the board skeptically. And his eyes flashed orange. Darcy noticed the pull of magic was just a tiny bit stronger than before. But Lord Bjarte was not as smart as he thought he was. She spent most of her time with Loki. She knew how magic felt. And just like anything else, Magic could be ignored if the caster was weak enough.

The sun caught the room in a yellow wholesome glow.

Two minutes.

Darcy knew what she had to do. She prepared every turn, each change of position in her Varins building a vulnerable defense so each time Lord Bjarte’s Norns took their turn, his confidence spiked. He might know something she didn’t, but even so, he wasn’t going to have more ways to hurt Loki if she could help it.

One minute left.

Lord Bjarte had not lost his pleasant smile, but his cold eyes bore into hers with every ounce of gloating contempt in his body. Darcy glared back, not with-holding the pouty sneer of her bottom lip.

In her mind, she felt a slight tug. It was warm, welcoming, and flowed over her senses like honey. The enticing force urged her to move the piece that would let Lord Bjarte win the game and let his Norn trap her king for good. Darcy knew it was magic.

Resistance was futile. She could not fight magic that powerful.

So, she abided by the little notion and pushed one of her Varins out of the way allowing the Lord to put her king into the trapped position of Konakis.

The sweet little warmth was removed from her mind as Lord Bjarte’s Weird Beard shimmered in the new light of day. “Well, Lady Darcy, I do believe I—”

“Raichi.” Darcy interrupted smoothly, moving her King back one space and, without thinking, Lord Bjarte moved his nearest piece forwards to recapture the position, compromising the safety of every one of his Norns.

He could not make a move for the rest of the game without having each of his pieces destroyed.

The sun was now a large yellow ball in the sky, casting its mocking glare over their table game. Darcy crossed her arms. “I win.”

Lord Bjarte’s cold eyes met hers, empty. They bored into her for gods know how long, as if searching out some miniscule detail he had missed. “So you did. I must admit, I do not know how. I am quite good at this game.”

Darcy stood up, her messy hair falling over one shoulder. “Well, ya know what they say. Only cheaters can beat cheaters.”

He stroked his weird beard. “Indeed. You have given me a great deal to think about, Darcy.”
She nodded once, placing her hands on her swords. “Yeah. I don’t really care what you think about. But I won, so remember our agreement.”

“And may I never forget.” The Lord said his voice silky and his smile devilish. “Good day, Lady Darcy. Prince Loki’s room is on the next floor and his door is gold.”

Loki sighed batting away the hand that poked his shoulder.

“No…Darcy. Go away.”

The poke turned into a healthy shake. “Loki, move. Come on! Look alive!”

He groaned, sitting up and was overcome by strangling nausea. He clamped a hand over his mouth and breathed deeply through his nose, the scent of parchment and fresh ink prominent.

There was an awful pain in his neck and based on the black splotched state of his hands, he had fallen asleep at his desk. He swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat and brought his hands up to squeeze his temples. “Darcy?”

A small tender hand touched his arm. “Hey, you okay?”

Loki leaned on the table, running a hand through his hair. Sometime during the night he had changed into leather pants and a simple green shirt that hung loose from his body. His helm was sitting, horns up, in bed with Fenrir and Jörmungandr. His head was pounding and he looked to be in a state of disarray.

“I’m fine.” He answered slowly, shutting his eyes to block out the harsh daylight.

What happened last night?

He sorted through his memories, eyes snapping open when he remembered his many discoveries. The first of which, was that he had been drunk.

He had gotten drunk. On his first trip away from the Capital with major responsibilities, Loki had gotten drunk. Oh gods, what was his mother going to say? She was going to kill him. It would be a painful death.

He groaned, letting his head fall into his inky palm. “Darcy, I’m a mess.”

“Yeah, you kinda are.” Darcy agreed, patting him on the back. “So, what is all this?” she gestured to the room behind her and Loki squinted through his barely parted lids to see what she was talking about.

The entire room was coated in paper. Each sheet was written on in tiny green print, the letters forming equations in so many languages and situations that it made his head spin. Considering his current state, that was not a fantastic response.

Fed up with his painful aftermath, Loki searched his cloudy mind for a spell and cast it on himself, feeling better almost immediately. He had never had use for a sobering charm until now. But it was quite efficient.

Brightened by his newfound awareness Loki turned to Darcy with enthusiasm. “Darcy, I have had a revelation. It is an absolute miracle, you wouldn’t believe it.”
Loki noticed she was dressed in Asgardian nightwear, her hair was in dire need of attention, she was barefoot, and her swords were belted around her waist. She was wandering along the walls, reading each paper with unwavering interest. “Loki…the Tesseract…you think the spell will work?”

He moved to stand next to her, searching the papers for a stack of equations. “Yes. According to my calculations, correct me if I’m wrong, the spell should be able to work like a Midgardian metal detector. As soon as we are in the general vicinity, the Tesseract should stick out like a Frost Giant on Nidavellir.”

Darcy examined his papers, running her thumb over the notes. “Loki, this spell is complicated. It’s made to detect powerful objects that are hidden under a magical barrier. What if the Tesseract isn’t?”

He frowned. “Well, I assume that it is. The tesseract would have to be under extreme pressure and at a very cool state for it to stay dormant for so long without any mass destruction taking place.”

“But shouldn’t we check for that first? There’s a big chance it could be on Jotunheim or Asgard or even Midgard.” Darcy suggested, lifting a few more sheets of paper from the wall. “And not to mention how much magic you need for it! Can you even do that without passing out?”

Loki pushed back his hair, pacing the room. “Yes, I suppose that is a problem. I cannot cast the spell yet. But I will be able to at some point.”

“In the meantime, we can check cold places, right?” Darcy asked again and Loki knew she meant Jotunheim. Why did Darcy want to go to Jotunheim? No idea. Was he going to let her go? No. It was too dangerous.

“Of course.” He said, turning back to the wall and searching through several bits of research material. “We will check Nidavellir when we go. Though our trip may be postponed at least a week.”

Darcy leapt in excitement when her eyes caught something on the wall opposite of them. “Loki? What’s that?”

He turned to see what she was looking at. Her gaze was trained precisely on his drawing of Lord Bjarte’s seal. A large Queen Bee with her stinger pointed forwards. She approached that side of the room, reading each of those papers with more relish and scrutiny than he’d ever seen before. Her small form seemed to devour every single word he had written. Her hands balled into fists whenever she came across a mishap in his writing or a gap in information.

“Loki, is all this true about Lord Weird Beard?” she asked, brushing her hand over the papers, but avoiding touching the one with the crest.

“Lord Weird Bead?”

“He has a Weird Beard.”

“It’s true.” Loki said.

“That he has a Weird Beard or that everything you said about him is true?”

“Both,” Loki clarified going to the wall that had captured Darcy’s attention. “Lord Bjarte is dangerous. He ploys. He lies and cheats those foolish enough to trust him and kills those who don’t. He’s very powerful. And, quite frankly, his beard is horrifying. I beg you, do not speak with
him. Do not even look at him. He has a reputation of challenging people to little games. He does not play fair and his gambles are pricy.” Loki muttered, rubbing his chin.

“According to discreet research…very…well, not exactly the most honest study I’ve ever done. It involved a lot of personal diary readings of people who have challenged or been challenged by Lord Bjarte. Or, the family members of the departed.”

“Uh…what do they say?” Darcy asked, her voice higher pitched than usual.

Loki looked to her with mild concern, only to have her wave on his words impatiently. “They say that he gets what he wants. He casts a spell beforehand that binds them to their agreement. If you lose the game and you don’t fulfill the agreement, you die.”

He expected Darcy to crack a joke or say something snarky, but she only stood there. Staring at Lord Bjarte’s seal. Then her knees buckled and Loki moved to catch her. “Darcy?” he asked urgently, supporting her weight and hefting her into his arms to lay her on the bed. Oh gods, what if she had made a deal with lord Bjarte? No…Darcy wouldn’t do that, would she?

Who was he kidding? Of course she would. And now she’s dead all because he had to get drunk! He was never drinking again. He was going to live a sober life from that day forwards. Never. Again.

He pressed a hand to her forehead, his heart hammering at every inch of his skin. Darcy could not be dead. No. What had he done?! He must find some way to revive her! There had to be a spell or--

Darcy’s eyes flickered open and Loki’s head fell with a loud ‘clunk’ against the bedpost as she sat up. “Holy Mother of Odin.”

“What?” he demanded insistently, trying to get his heart rate to return to normal. He practiced breathing while Darcy smoothed back his hair in a comforting gesture.

“Hey, you okay?” she asked timidly, obviously disturbed by his loss of composure.

He sought to regain it, but found his eyes wet and his body entirely unwilling to cooperate. She hadn’t been dead. She merely fainted. That was all. No need to be concerned. His hands shook and he balled them into fists at his sides to stop the absurd scene he was making.

But Darcy only seemed concerned. “Sh, hey, it’s okay, Lokes,” she chided, bringing him into her arms where he stared into her eyes until he was positive he had not killed her.

The panic ebbed away till he was left with varied and scattered emotions. “Darcy, what have you done?”

She stood up, rocking back on her heels sheepishly. “I…uh…well… I might… have maybe actually probably madea dealwith Lord Bjartetheguywith theWeirdBeard.”

Loki gaped at her in absolute horror, “Darcy…Darcy! Darcy why!?”

She crossed her arms. “What?”

“You have lost the game to Lord Bjarte and now you’re going to die. This is my fault. I’m so sorry Darcy, this—“

He stopped talking when Darcy thumped him on the back of his head. It didn’t hurt, per say, it didn’t really feel great either. “What?”
She crossed her arms. “I won, you egg!”

Loki simply stared. “You won.”

“Yep.”

“In a Hnefatafl match?”

“Yep.”

“You beat him?”

“Clearly.”

“And you had a part of the bargain to be fulfilled?”

“Duh.”

“And you won.”

“Loki, I am beginning to feel offended,” Darcy pouted.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry. It’s just that…well, people claim he uses magic to cheat. That is the only way he plays.”

“He did use magic,” Darcy said, wiping some ink off his cheek. “Lord Bjarte usually plays people in Nornheim. And, let’s face it Loki, Norns are good at some things, but cunning isn’t one of them. They don’t know he uses magic and they’re not brilliant strategists. They’re more the brute force type people. Like Thor. That’s why Lord Bjarte does so well in Nornheim. He’s the smartest one here.”

Loki’s brow crinkled, his grip still strong on her shoulders. “But Darcy, you are mortal. You cannot resist magic when it is used on your mind.”

She shrugged. “That’s true. But Norns don’t cheat when they play games. I do.”

Loki blinked.

She sighed, wetting her thumb to better smear the green and black splotches off his face. “I could feel the magic, Loki. Lord Bjarte doesn’t even know how to play the game right. I just moved my pieces around more and tricked him into thinking he almost won before beating him. He made me move a specific piece but it was the wrong piece. So I won.”

Loki was at a loss.

Darcy was insane. She was crazy, off her rocker, ingenious, and his best friend.

A whirl of pride shot through him. “Darcy, you are incredible.”

“I know, right?”

“Darcy, are you aware of what this means?”

“I’m totally amazing and deserve all the chocolate in the world?” she guessed hopefully, beaming up at Loki’s now spotless face.
He let go of her, striding around the room. “Darcy, what did you ask for?”

Darcy tapped her chin pensively. “Well, he had been going on about how he knew that I wasn’t Asgardian blah blah blah, then he was acting like he was going to blackmail you. So, our deal was that he wouldn’t tell anyone about me. Ever.”

Loki felt his heart drop. “He knew?”

“Well, not exactly,” Darcy explained. “He was talking funny. Anyways, I think I should have asked for something different. I mean, I wish I had read this wall first. I could have asked for him to stop with all the Vanaheim threats and everything and—“

Loki cut her words off with a tight hug. “No. No, your gamble was perfect. You have protected yourself. That is what’s important.”

“I didn’t do it for me,” Darcy said breathlessly, Loki’s arms squeezing the air from her lungs. Hastily he released her. “I did it for you. He was going to use it against you in the council meetings. You don’t have to worry about that now, so you can kick his butt when he goes on his taking over Vanaheim streaks.”

Loki shook his head, waving his hands to make the papers on the walls disappear in a flash of green light. He would sort through them later when he didn’t have to get them back to the capital. It was bad enough they spent the night. “How was your night Darcy? What did you think of the party?”

Darcy flopped onto his bed, waking Fenrir and Jörmungandr. They had a small reunion full of licks and face cuddles. “It was okay. The fruit was really good and I danced with this guy. I think his name was Halvor. He was nice. But then Thor was a butt and he made Sif cry and then we had a sleepover in my room.”

Loki had magicked his regular armor into place and combed back his hair. “Sif cries?”

He stepped out of the way as a pillow came flying towards him. Fenrir barked. “What?”

“Of course she does! You cry, don’t you?” Darcy asked defensively.

Loki sat next to her on the bed. “Occasionally. It was not meant as an offense. You must realize, Darcy, I hold Sif in the highest of respects. It was merely a surprise.”

She smirked. “Okay okay. Just never be Thor.”

“I do not wish to be,” Loki assured, smiling as Darcy rested her head on his shoulder.

She took his hands, tracing the ink splatters. “I missed you last night. I thought we could have gone and found the library or something. But you looked busy.”

Loki remembered the previous night and his true rationale for not speaking with Darcy and blushed. “I apologize. I was not feeling quite like myself.”

“Was it the killing thing?” she asked softly, turning her head to look him in the eyes.

“Partially,” he said, vowing on his mother’s soul to never ever tell her his true reasoning.

“Do you—

“Come on, we need to go. Do you wish to wear your armor out today?” he asked, standing up.
Darcy nodded, the tiniest of pouts on her lips. “Yeah. Can you do my hair, too? The handmaidens made it really curly yesterday and now it’s messy.”

He readily agreed, mentally preparing for a day that was already proving to be far too dangerous for his mortal friend. It was official now. No matter what happened, he was not leaving her side again until she was safely back on Midgard where no one could hurt her or make magical bets that could ultimately result in her untimely death.

But, he supposed, on Midgard, there was that Idiot Boy…. As a friend, it would not be in Darcy’s best interests to take her back to the place where she would be subjected to such primitive courtship.

Yet, in Asgard, there was Lord Bjarte and he would have to go into a lot of meetings when they got back to the capital to sort out what is to happen on Vanaheim. He would also be facing the Allfather’s rage for their rather rude behaviors pertaining to Thor’s bloodlust and Loki’s magical extremities….

Still, on Midgard there was Idiot Boy…. “Darcy?” Loki asked, gently brushing out her tangles.

“Yeah?”

“When do you need to be home?”

She tapped her chin, “Hm, I think I need to be back in time for soccer practice on Wednesday. Why? How’s my double working out? Is she okay? Is she just doing what I normally do all day? Are my parents okay?”

Loki inwardly shamed himself for being so selfish with Darcy’s company. She should be home. With her family.

But then again, they would want her to do what makes her happy, wouldn’t they? Murmuring a spell, he looked through the eyes of her double and saw that she was playing a board game with her family and they all seemed to be in rather high spirits.

“Your doppelganger is fine. As are your parents. I was curious as to if you might be interested, that is, of course, if you’re willing to stay another day in Asgard, in partaking as witness during a council meet--?”

“YES! Are you kidding me?! A council meeting?! Are you serious?! Yes! Yes! Yes!” She turned around, hair half combed to throw her arms around his neck in the most forceful hug he’d ever been given.

Well, he supposed that answered that question.

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Frigga’s last few days had not been ideal. Her husband in the Odinsleep was never a good sign. And with Thor and Loki away to war in Nornheim? Her sons, she had no doubt, were fully capable of not getting a sword in the back. But when it came to the inner workings of their dispute with Nornheim…well Thor had no idea what he was doing and Loki was far too clever for any of the Lords to trust him completely.

Naturally she had been worried.
After returning from Odin’s bedside that night, she decided it was not in her best interest to sleep. With all her concerns building up, no doubt her dreams would haunt her like vicious beasts in the night. So, she returned to her private quarters where none went but herself and the occasional guest.

In the center of the room, set on a gold pedestal and surrounded by trickling gold fountains and small gentle waterfalls was her scrying pool.

It was a rare skill to be able to see the future and she did not dwell on her propensity for it. Very few could see what lay ahead and it was a dangerous act. A very dangerous act indeed. More than that, the future could never be exactly predicted.

What she could see was murky and the brief tellings were only flashes of events that never told the whole story. The scrying pool would focus these visions, keeping them safe from the defilement of fallible memory. Still, she was very careful not to dwell on what she saw. Looking too deeply into the future was dangerous and could lead people to do destructive things, especially concerning those they loved.

Attempting to settle her nerves with the steady work of weaving, Frigga sat down in a window seat to gaze at the stars and replicate their beauty. Then, all of a sudden, the room darkened. The stars outside of her window seemed to dim and her needle did not shine in the muted light of the night sky.

It was pitch black when an eerie light began to radiate from her scrying pool.

Frigga cautiously licked her lips, tasting the magic that had filled the room.

The power was ancient, unruly energy that sparked the slightest bit of fear into her bones. This was not simply a vision. No. A force far beyond herself was doing this. Someone...something older, she’d venture to say, than Yggdrasil as it was known that day.

Carefully, she stood, tapestry falling to the floor as she stalked nearer and nearer to the pool.

Hands poised to deflect any offensive spell, Frigga peered into the basin and gasped in horror, quickly working to regain her wits.

In one last blinding flash of crimson tinted darkness, the room returned to its normal brightness, leaving the queen to grip the sides of her pool in fearful comprehension at what she had seen.

Somewhere, sometime, in the future, were forces so powerful, realms would fall from their mere presence.

And somehow, in the mix of it, whether the beginning, or the end, was a helplessly brave black haired prince, accompanied by a mortal girl with enough fierce determination to fuel their curiosity for the next millennium.

Frigga sighed heavily. Oh gods give her strength. She was going to need it.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Beautiful Humans! I have things to explain for this chapter!
First off, I've gotta admit, this chapter was fucking long. It's a long chapter. I'm sorry/not sorry about that. I might have gotten a little carried away with the tasertricks of it all.

Next: Loki. His drunkeness needs some 'splanin'. In my mind, drinking culture on Asgard is a little different than on Earth. It wouldn't be recommended that someone Loki's age drink copious amounts of alcohol, but they're allowed some. Loki kinda just...took it a teensy bit too far.
I also referenced Emily Dickinson because she is one of my alltime favorite poetic heroines. Loki quotes her in his drunken stupor.

Hnefatafl is a thing. Technically it was a Medieval strategy game similar to chess. Instead of Norns and Varins, it was played with Swedes and Moscovites. I changed the rules a little bit, wrote very vague direction for the characters and voila! You've got fanfiction brilliance!

I feel as thought I need some explaination for my OCs. If you hadn't noticed already, this fic has got some pretty serious OC characters that are borne both from my obsession with Game of Thrones and also the need to have Loki become involved with political settings. He's a prince and I sort of got from the movies that there was a lot of political tension. I kinda want to put a bit of a weight on Loki's actions in accordance to canon. Also, Darcy is a political bluff and she needs practice.

Inspiration for this chapter is brought to you by this lovely image:

Thank you all! I appreciate all kudos, comments and bookmarks! Please comment!
Frank Goes to a Meeting

Chapter Summary

Sif makes a friend. Loki worries. Feminism is a thing. Frigga is Frigga.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is going to be great!”

“Yes, but—“

“I’m going to change out of this armor and then we’re going to go to the library! And then we can go to the council meeting and then back to the library and--!”

“Darcy, please,” Loki urged as they walked through the lengthy glimmering corridors of the palace closely trailed by Thor and his friends. “We must be cautious. Keep in mind, whilst in the meeting you will not be able to speak unless called as a witness first.”

Darcy’s pout could not be held longer than a few seconds due to the sheer excitement radiating off her person. “Man, today has been so productive! And it isn’t even lunchtime yet!”

“Indeed,” Loki sighed, unable to hold back a small smile. He deeply wished he shared Darcy’s enthusiasm for the upcoming meeting. But it was like being excited about a beating from Mjolnir. “Darcy?”

“Yeah?” she asked, spinning around in circles to take in the sculpted high ceilings and intricate metal workings on the supporting columns.

“I must go and meet with my mother for a few moments and report the happenings on Nornheim. Would you like to come with me? You mentioned your desires to be rid of your armor for now,” he inquired, stroking Jörmungandr’s back as he pulled himself over the young prince’s shoulders.

Darcy considered this for a moment. “Well, I think that you being all royalty and everything means I would probably get kicked out of the meeting with your mom…” she hesitated. “If I go to get changed, will you promise to find me right after you finish?”

He quirked a grin. “Of course.”

“You didn’t promise.” She smirked, stopping to stare up at him. Both her and Fenrir’s blue eyes pierced him.

He offered her his extended pinky and she took it. “I, Loki Odinson, promise Darcy that I will return to her directly after the meeting with Queen Frigga.” He swore with every manner of princely authority in his body.

Darcy nodded in approval, wide blue eyes staring up at him with open sincerity. “Good. Because last night I missed you.”
Loki felt his heart soften a bit and he gave her the slightest of bows. “You have my word, Darcy.”

Just as he had said this, the rest of their group approached, Sif in the lead. The warrior smiled at Darcy and even gave Loki an only slightly cooler look before petting Fenrir on the head. “If I’ve heard correctly, Darcy, you wish to adorn lighter clothing?”

He let Jörmungandr off his shoulders to slither after Fenrir. He made the educated choice not to worry about what they would get up to in the palace. Loki decided it was time to take his leave, walking away at an even pace to allow Thor time to catch up with him. Sure enough, his brother was by his side in mere seconds and together they strode in morbid silence towards their Mother’s chambers where the verdict of their punishment would be declared.

Thor cleared his throat after a few minutes, “Loki, may I be quite…honest…with you?”

“Of course,” Loki said, voice even. His tone came across just as a prince’s should.

“Well,” Thor cleared his throat again and Loki noticed it was a newer one of his brother’s nervous ticks. Or perhaps Thor had never had reason to be nervous until recently. “What do you think my penalty will be for my deeds on Nornheim?”

Loki was not the least bit surprised at this question and he came back with an easy answer. “Whatever penalty Mother deems sufficient.”

“Loki, that was the least insightful answer you could have given me.” Thor almost whined and Loki’s lips came up in a tiny smile.

“That answer is the most insight anyone will ever get into what Mother thinks,” Loki reminded him grimly. “Besides, my punishment will be much worse.”

Thor turned to his brother confused. “Why would you be punished?”

Loki cast him a half-hearted sideways glance. “Thor, I broke every law in Nornheim regarding the use of magical practices during a wartime state and then proposed adding more people to the council all without the Allfather’s consent.”

The blonde prince simply blinked in amazement. “But they did not arrest you.”

“No,” Loki agreed, “they did not. But they also did not know that it was I who cast the spell until halfway through our discussion. It allowed me to build up a small defense for both of our misbehaviors.”

Thor sighed heavily, clapping his brother on the shoulder. “Do not worry, Loki. Mother will not punish you.”

“No,” Loki agreed again, “I suppose she will leave it to Father.”

They shared a solemn nod before approaching the door to their Mother’s Ladies’ chambers. Loki had once asked her why, when the Allfather was in the Odinsleep, she didn’t sit on the throne.

Frigga had told him that she didn’t need a chair to assert her authority.

Truer words may have never been spoken.

The guards on duty bowed, opening the doors and announced them. “Princes Thor and Loki.”

Cautiously, the two boys entered the room, shoulders back and chins high, prepared to accept their
retribution. The Queen of Asgard was seated in a high backed chair, angled so it faced the window. She stood, her golden skirts flowing around her ankles and Loki thought he heard Thor whimper a small cry of fear.

Loki could not blame him.

Frigga turned to them slowly; her features focused in the most terrifying look a mother could give: disapproval.

“Thor—” she began strictly, only to be cut off by a near trembling Thor.

“Mother, I am sorry!” he interrupted, rushing forwards, his eyes wide and pleading. “It was wrong of me, I know this now. My actions do not reflect my status and I apologize for my wrongdoings.”

Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Here was his brother, the Mighty Thor, Prince of Thunder, reduced to a scared mess at the barest notion of his mother’s scolding. Frigga folded her hands in front of her, looking down at her eldest son with a veil of disappointment that just shadowed her amusement. “I see. And you are apologizing to me and not those families in Nornheim whom you have broken.”

The blonde prince paled. “I...I will do so.”

“Indeed you will,” she said sternly, raising her brows in an expression that radiated motherly disapproval. It sent chills through the room so strong, even the guards at the entrance shifted with unease. “You will take tonight to rest and recuperate. In the morning, you will board a longship back to Nornheim where you will offer your condolences through speech at their funerals.”

Thor looked like this was the last thing he wanted to do. But Frigga’s scrutinizing glare kept his tongue in place. “Yes Mother.”

“Good. Now come here. I’m glad to see that you are unharmed.” She smiled, opening her arms to embrace him. Thor returned her affection, his head on her shoulder. After a moment, Frigga pulled away and stroked the side of his face. “Now, go freshen up. Your father will not awaken from the Odinsleep for at least another day.”

Thor nodded, giving her a quick bow before exiting the room. On his way out he stopped to put a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “Tell no one of this.”

Loki smirked, raising a singular brow at his brother. “Very well.”

Thor’s cheeks were slightly pink when he finally left, leaving Loki to the fate of his mother’s words.

“Loki,” she greeted with a warm smile.

“Mother.” He returned her welcome, though the warmth did not reach his eyes.

She held out her hand for him to take and Loki accepted it with ease as they strode to look out the open window together. “You have confused the Norns, Darling.”

He folded his hands behind his back. “I understand. I have done many things without confirming my actions with Allfather beforehand and I am willing to accept any punishment given to me.”

Frigga sighed, a sad smile on her face as she cupped his cheek, running her thumb over his cheek. “You have grown, Loki. It is strange for a mother, who firstly remembers her sons as children, to
see them become little men.”

Touching the hand that held his face, Loki met his mother’s eyes. “Are you not angry, Mother? Surely I have caused trouble for the capital.”

She shook her head, bringing him into a tight hug. “No. I am not angry. Let your Father give you your sentence.” Her chin settled atop his head. “Just promise me you will be careful, yes?”

“I swear it,” Loki said, pulling away to see into his mother’s deep blue eyes.

She laughed and Loki saw thousands of years of secrets in the corner of her mouth. “I am sure you will try your best.”

She released him, settling back down into her chair. “Now, you have some friends to go see, do you not?”

“I do,” he agreed, heading for the door. “Farewell, Mother.”

He had almost left when she called after him. “Oh, and Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Tell Lady Darcy that I must play her in Hnefatafl sometime. Lord Bjarte seems to think she is remarkable at it,” the Allmother said, turning in her chair to give him a sly grin.

Loki could not hide the knowing amusement that bubbled in his chest as a secret acknowledgement passed through them. “I will be sure to tell her.”

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Darcy smiled at herself in the mirror, pleased with the outfit the ladies had given her.

Unlike her previous dresses, this one was not completely majestic or bejeweled. The skirts were freer and her arms were bare with the exception of silver bracers that went up to her elbows. One of her shoulders was armored by a decorative shoulder plate that strapped to a matching silver breastplate that made up the bodice of her dress. The free material of her skirt was silky and moved when she did.

Needless to say, she could totally feel air on her butt.

She turned to Sif, satisfied that the ladies let her keep her swords. It was a lot easier to make them listen to her when the female warrior was around. She happened to notice that they sent Sif a lot of rude looks and a group of pretty women with haughty jaws snickered in a corner.

“What do you think?” she asked proudly, drawing her right sword and posing dramatically.

Sif chuckled a bit, standing up from her stiff position in her chair. “Very few ladies dress like that. Some who train with daggers do. And Queen Frigga, of course.”

Darcy shrugged, sheathing her weapons, walking with Sif through the endless chambers of fluttering skirts and gossiping women. The place had a cozy sort of appeal. But she couldn’t imagine spending the day there. It seemed terribly boring, not to mention all of the ladies kept whispering to each other as they passed. She couldn’t catch any of what they were saying, but she guessed it wasn’t nice.

They were halfway through the chambers when someone cleared their throat.
Darcy turned and Sif froze in her tracks. Behind them was a medium height girl, not looking that much older than Sif, with dirty blonde hair and pink cheeks. “These rooms are for the Ladies only.”

Sif kept walking, clearly ignoring the girl who was speaking. But Darcy turned to face her, acknowledging the lady stood at least a head taller than herself. “Who are you talking to?”

There were a few chiming laughs that Darcy was beginning to detest. “Well, obviously the only two here who aren’t ladies,” she said with an overly sweet smile. “Not the smartest little thing, are you?”

Darcy crossed her arms, raising her chin. “I’m not a thing. I’m a person. I am Lady Darcy, and Sif can be here if she wants to be.”

“Darcy…” Sif muttered, reaching behind her to touch the fierce little girl’s arm. “Let us go.”

Darcy ignored her as the lady with dirty blonde hair sneered. “Running away to go play with knives, Sif? You know, the black hair suits you. It took away the last thing any man could ever really want in you—“

“Hey!” Darcy interrupted angrily. “That was a horrible thing to say!”

“Was it?” the girl challenged, tilting her chin higher. “Allow me to introduce myself Lady Dancy—“

“—Darcy—“

“I am Gera Dregadottir.” She said this and the room hushed, like this was the most important title anyone could have. Darcy recognized the name. She was the daughter of one of the richer nobles in the capital. Lady Drega was husband to Lord Odmir and they enjoyed flaunting their titles.

Darcy smirked, hands on her hips. “Oh yeah? Well, do you know who I am?”

“Daughter of a cow?” Gera asked, voice sickly polite.

“A girl with two swords,” Darcy said with definiteness, placing her hands on the pommels of her blades.

“Was that a threat?” the blonde sneered, arms crossed and leaning down to tower over the shorter girl.

“No,” Darcy said indignantly. “It’s a reminder that you’re being mean to the two people who just got back from a war to protect you and your sewing stuff.”

Gera’s jaw clenched and she took a step back. “You are threatening me! You little wench!” she reached around her grappling at a plate of cheese for a short serrated knife.

Darcy, ever more infuriated, took a step forwards, but this time, a small quiet voice echoed through the room. “Lady Darcy, Lady Sif, you have returned safely.”

Everyone in the room hushed, including Gera, each of them pretending to return to what they were doing as the owner of the silken voice strode towards them. Darcy whipped around to see an almost white haired girl with sparkling blue eyes.

“Sigyn!” she called, running towards the girl and capturing her in a tight embrace. “I missed you! I
feel like I haven’t see you in forever! Well, we only met that once but you’re a great friend! And I
can’t believe that you and Loki—“

“Darcy!” Sigyn gasped, her voice alight with a combination of surprise, amusement, and horror.
“Let us have our reunion elsewhere, yes?”

She nodded enthusiastically, moving to follow Sigyn out when she noticed Sif was already walking
towards the alternate exit. “Sif, come on, we’re going this way.”

The dark haired girl turned around, her cheeks red and her actions hesitant. “Darcy, I am not sure if
—“

“Sif, you promised you would sit next to me at dinner. And we were going to go spar later,” Darcy
reminded insistently, taking note of the tentative glance between the two girls.

Sigyn stepped forwards and Darcy was forced to accept that everyone on Asgard was officially
taller than her. “I would be honored if you would join us, Lady Sif.”

Sif, not wanting to be impolite, nodded once and the three of them left the ladies chambers, an
eruption of simpering whispers in their wake.

Immediately, Darcy began talking again. “Sigyn! I can’t believe you and Loki are going to be
together! This is fabulous! I mean, sure I knew he like-liked you and everything, but then you
kissed--!”

“Darcy!” Sigyn said, fear stricken. “You cannot just say that!”

Sif was taken back. “Sigyn? You have kissed Prince Loki?”

Sigyn’s face turned pink, and she quickly looked away. “Honestly, Darcy, I see you now after a
year and the first thing you do is bring up that which no one knows about.”

Darcy grinned. “Aw, come on. You didn’t tell anyone?”

“Of course not,” she said, leading them down a slightly narrower hall.

“I bet you did!” Darcy taunted.

“It would be most improper, Darcy.”

Sif seemed to be stifling laughter and Sigyn glanced at her incredulously, as she had never seen the
warrior laugh in her presence. “What is it?”

They all stopped and the air was thick with tension as Sif managed a few short words. “You kissed
Loki.”

The three girls stood and looked to one another.

A seconds passed.

Then another.

And suddenly they burst into hysterias. Darcy was bent over, clutching her gut while Sif’s head
was thrown back, sending loud peals down the hall. Even Sigyn could not contain herself and her
usually soft voice was cackling in lovely mirth at their ridiculous humor.
And thus, a powerful friendship was borne.

Just as they started to calm down and Darcy was wiping tears from her eyes, a certain dark haired prince approached them through the entry from whence they came. He gave them a confused look before they broke down into fits of insane glee once more.

Finally, Sigyn managed to compose herself, face red from her hairline to the neck of her silver and gold dress. “Prince Loki…my apologies…”

Darcy sniffed, pushing hair out of her face. “Loki…you kis—!”

Her mouth was quickly covered by a barely calm Sif. “Do not say it again or he will have us sent off to the healers.”

Darcy ripped off Sif’s hand and grinned widely at her prince friend. “Oops, sorry,” she said, not sounding the least bit apologetic as she looked between him and Sigyn. “Come on, Sif. Let’s go eat stuff, they can catch up later.”

The girls linked arms and both Loki and Sigyn sent their friend betrayed looks.

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Loki was humored if not slightly exasperated.

Darcy tells him to come and find her afterwards, and then immediately after he tracks her down, she leaves him with a red faced Sigyn.

Loki did not think he had ever seen her express such emotion before in anyone’s presence. Then again, Darcy’s enthusiasm was near contagious. She was simply charismatic. In every sense of the word.

“Prince Loki,” Sigyn said, bowing her head, a golden circlet on her hair. “I am glad you have returned safely.”

He gave her a small smile. “Well, almost,” he joked, surprisingly pleased to see her again. It was odd how Sigyn had gone, in his mind, from some untouchable aura to a person he could call friend. She looked concerned for a moment before she detected his jest. “Nonsense. You are whole, I take it?”

“Indeed,” he said, looking down at her shyly. “And so is this.” Loki reached around his neck and removed her key.

She tentatively reached out to take it, grasping the chain between her delicate fingers. “Thank you, Prince Loki.”

“Sigyn?”

“Yes.”

“If it is your wish…you may call me Loki. But only if you like, of course.” He told her, curious as to if the familiarity of not using titles to refer to one another was too intimate. Perhaps it would not be, considering their…relationship.

A light blush remained on her cheeks from earlier and in their close proximity, Loki was reminded of their kiss. He secretly wondered if he had been as terrible a kisser as Idiot Boy.
“I think I would very much like that, Loki,” she said, folding her hands in front of her.

“That is pleasing to hear, Sigyn,” he said, insides thudding with delight and he offered her his arm. “Would you also like accompaniment to the midday meal?”

She took his arm in response and together they made their way to the dining hall. All the while, Loki asked her questions as to what she had been up to since he had been gone and he reveled in how her perfectly structured character would slip away while she talked and, for a moment, he was able to see who she really was.

It made him smile.

“Loki?” she asked as they neared their destination.

“Sigyn?”

She tittered just a little. “Your friend, Lady Darcy, is she always so…?”

“Excited?”

“Free.” Sigyn finished her grip on his arm just the right pressure. “I have never seen anyone who speaks their mind so openly. I…” she trailed off like she had gotten carried away with her words.

Loki waited for her to continue.

“…I fear she may get herself into trouble,” she confessed quietly. “I will not admit to have known her for long, but she is most delightful company in the time I have. And just recently, well, I cannot ever remember laughing so hard…But, do you understand what I mean when I say that she is perhaps, too brave?”

Loki sighed, grimacing. “Sigyn, I know exactly what you mean.” He turned his gaze to her and smiled tiredly. “Come, let us dine. I am curious as to how your magic lessons are going.”

They met with Darcy and Sif again who were sitting side by side, talking, eating and laughing as Sif recalled a story that had ended in Fandral’s failure at courting women.

Sigyn nodded appreciatively and silently tilted her cup in praise of Sif’s story. Her movements were so subtle that no one would have noticed unless they were specifically looking for them as Loki was.

Their meal was going quite well until Fandral and Darcy began to argue. It started out as simple bickering, but eventually, the occupants of the seats near them began listening in until even Sigyn was engrossed in their dispute.

“...Why don’t you explain why you think that then, Fandral?!”

He held his hands out before him, clearly flustered. “Because….Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because that is just how it is!” he shouted, banging his fist on the table. “Magic is for women!”

Darcy put both her hands on the table, leaning forwards so she was nose to nose with the blonde haired boy. “Then are swords only for men?”

“Yes!” he answered immediately then shot a hesitant glance toward Sif. “I mean, no.” He shook
out his blonde hair. “It is no matter! Everyone knows that—!”

“‘Magic is for women, blah blah blah,’” Darcy mocked. “Well, I’m a girl, and I don’t use magic.”

“Yes, well, you would probably have a greater inclination to it than swordsmanship,” he shot and Darcy crossed her arms.

“Excuse me?”

He sat back in his chair, looking smug. “Oh please, we saw you in Nornheim, Lady Darcy. The wound in your leg was so deep, Loki had to carry you as if you were a mere babe.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she put her hands on her hips. “Even if I suck, I’m still better than you.”

Loki kneaded his temples. Where most people would simply let Fandral rant about the roles different genders played and their crafts, Darcy would have to argue. Wonderful.

He was about to intervene, enter the conversation and then drag Darcy away to the library where Fandral could not spear her through, when two hands stopped him, one on his wrist and the other on his shoulder. Both Sif and Sigyn were giving him warning eyes.

Sif shook her head, “Sit down, Loki.”

“But she—“

Sigyn squeezed his hand, “Sif is right, Loki. They have been quarreling over this matter for nearly an hour. If you take her away now, Fandral will win and she will no doubt be even more angry.”

Loki saw her perspective, but he had already seen Darcy fight too many times in the past two days and he did not wish to see it again. “Sigyn, is this not what you meant by her being too brave?”

She lifted her chin just a bit and a bit of defiance he had never seen before bloomed on her normally cool features. “Perhaps I misspoke. Perhaps she is simply brave enough to compensate for other’s conformity.”

He stared. She had just insulted him. Sigyn, of all people, had just accused him of being compliant. He could not say she was wrong. He had always figured it better that way, to accept what people thought of his use of magic. Or do as Sif has done and ignore anyone who tells him he is wrong for what he does and simply continue with his studies.

But he had never seen it in such a negative way that implies he let people, to use the Midgardian term, ‘walk all over him.’

At her words, he sat down. “I just do not want her to be hurt,” he told them honestly.

Sigyn nodded in understanding, but Sif smirked. “Have some faith in her, Loki. Clearly she is not incapable with a sword.”

Loki considered her words. Darcy had proved herself with a blade, had she not? The only reason she was injured was because a man she thought disarmed had proved to be otherwise. He had underestimated her against Lord Bjarte and now he was making assumptions again.

He tried to imagine the dangers now as Fandral got to his feet and challenged Darcy to a duel. He would not truly hurt her, would he? Of course not, they were in the dining hall. There would be no blood shed—
“Loki?”

“Yes Sigyn?”

“Would you please lessen your hold on my hand?” she asked politely and he thought there was a bit of humor in her words.

Sif gave him an odd look as he quickly released Sigyn’s hand which he had been squeezing tightly. “You are truly worried for her?”

He raised his brows in response, unable to hide his incredulous glare.

She crossed her arms, sitting back in her chair to speak to him around Sigyn. “Fandral will not truly injure her, even if he does manage to land a blow.”

He cast a wary glance to where Darcy and Fandral circled each other in the center of the hall as the dancers moved to make room for them. “I am aware. It does little to lessen my concern.”

Sif quirked a grin. “She cannot keep her mouth shut. She was nearly speared with a cheese knife today in the ladies chambers.”

Sigyn quickly covered her mouth to hide a grin. Sif noticed and cocked her head in question. “Yes?”

The blonde girl was hesitant for a moment. “It would be impolite of me to say. Forgive me, Lady Sif.”

They continued meek conversation while Loki focused his attention on Darcy, biting down his anxiety. This time, Darcy faced the challenge, not of being overpowered, but of being too slow.

Fandral was a swordsman, and as much as it pained Loki to admit, he was a rather good one. He was renowned for his grace and eloquence with a blade. They had sparred before and Loki found it difficult to best him without the use of magic. As Darcy fought Fandral now, her brows knit together, analyzing his movements in search of weakness.

His blade was quick and Darcy’s moves seemed sluggish in comparison. No doubt her muscles would be sore from the day prior as she did not have the stamina that most Asgardians had, and she was not even wearing proper armor. Loki nearly fell from his chair when Fandral’s sword lashed out and hit Darcy’s left wrist causing her to drop one of her swords.

“Are you ready to submit, Lady Darcy?!” he asked, coming at her again and forcing her to fight him off with only her right sword.

“No,” she grunted, neatly parrying one of his attacks.

A fine sheen of sweat formed on her forehead as she calculated Fandral’s movements. Loki gripped the arms of his chair in anticipation, barely restraining his urge to throw himself between them and demand that they cease their brawl. He was a prince. He could do that if he wanted.

The he saw it. Something he recognized as realization flashed in Darcy’s eyes and she smiled like she had come to some great revelation. Dodging Fandral’s latest swipe, she let her sword arm fall as she pointed at something over his shoulder, “Oh look, what’s that!!?”

Unthinking, Fandral looked to where she was pointing and Darcy swatted his wrist with her blade, causing him to drop his sword. Darcy swooped down to pick it up before Fandral could even move
to rectify his mistake and had both her blades positioned at his neck. “I win.”

Fandral blinked down at her. “That is not fair!”

“Yes it is! I won! You dropped your sword. Now admit I’m right,” she growled lowering the blades. “That was the deal.”

Fandral ripped his sword from her grasp, “I made that agreement in the assumption that you were a fair fighter! Clearly you are not!”

“That was fair! You just looked the other way!”

“You cheated!”

“No!”

“Liar!”

“Loser!”

Loki decided it was now his time to step in as Darcy and Fandral had stowed their swords and they were right in each other’s faces. In hardly anytime at all, Loki and Volstagg were taking their respective friends and prying them away from each other.

Eventually, Loki had pulled Darcy away, and after a few more insults exchanged between her and Fandral, she had calmed down to a pouting state. She sat back in her chair next to Sif and bitterly stabbed at her potatoes, muttering under her breath.

Sif elbowed her, “So, I take it you like Fandral then?”

The following explosion resulted in Sigyn heaving laughs into Loki’s shoulder and Sif getting hit in the breast.

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After eating, Loki and Darcy insisted that all of them go to the library to do research on a project they were working on. Sigyn, preferring the company of Loki and Darcy, agreed and was surprised to see Sif come with them as well.

When they first arrived in Loki’s corner of the library, he and Darcy had made sure to keep Sif and Sigyn informed on what they were talking about. But, as the day progressed, their language became more confusing and their tones transformed from explicative teacher to overenthusiastic researcher.

Sigyn thought they were quite amusing, especially when Fenrir and Jörmungandr showed up, both covered from head to toe in white soap bubbles. Darcy shook her head at them as Loki cast a spell to rid them of their suds. The animals spent a lot of time hovering over books in fashions reminiscent of their masters. Sigyn could not remember ever feeling so light hearted. Jörmungandr came up to mouth her jaw at one point and even gave Sif a tentative lick on the nose.

She had picked out a book, a fictional story about Galaxy Dragons and an Aesir prince who rode one around Yggdrasil. As much as she enjoyed her time with Loki, often times, Sigyn felt as though she could not keep up with him intellectually. He hardly ever talked about himself, always
wishing to know more about what she liked to see and learn. He never had the light in his eyes as he did with Darcy now.

A few months ago, she had admitted her secret passion for fictional stories and Loki had sought out books she might like and would discuss them with her when no one else would. But now, seeing him babble on in languages she could not even comprehend about subjects she had never heard of, it made her happy that he could have a friend like Darcy who shared his interests more closely.

“…no that won’t work!” Darcy said, clearly frustrated as she simultaneously read a book and scrawled notes on a thick piece of parchment. “The surface of Nidavellir is basically a magnetic field! Even if we did use this spell there, it would have so much interference we wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a sorcerer and the tesseract!”

Loki shook his head, “There are no sorcerers on Nidavellir. You know this. However, I see your point. Any kind of energy would make it near impossible. What if we were to counteract that factor with another…?”

Sif, who had been quiet the entire time, leaned over in her chair to speak to Sigyn. “Do you understand what they are talking about?”

Sigyn gave her a small smile and a shrug. “Not at all.” She gently closed her book, marking the page with a scrap of parchment Loki had balled up earlier.

The black haired girl snorted, not bothering to mask the sound and reached down to affectionately rub Fenrir’s ears.

Sigyn, for the longest time, had not known what to think of Sif. She had always been beautiful, her features far from plain or unattractive. Yet, she had made friends with Thor when she was quite young and dedicated herself to the life of a warrior. Her black hair hung loose around her face making her firm jaw and determined eyes seem softer.

Despite common belief, Sigyn did not believe that black hair made anyone less appealing. In fact, she found it quite beautiful. Often times, when Loki would steal away time to sit with her in the library she would catch herself staring at how, when the sun shined in his hair, it was almost purple.

Sif’s hair was like that now, the sleek strands glimmering in the evening light. It took Sigyn a moment to realize that she had been starring. Quickly, she turned away, afraid she had overstepped.

“What are you reading?” Sif asked curiously, nodding to the book in Sigyn’s lap.

She ran her hands over the cover before setting it beside her. “It is nothing.”

Sif eyed her suspiciously, “No, tell me. I’m interested.”

Her lips twitched as she offered Sif the book. “It’s a story about a young prince who is friends with a Galaxy Dragon and together they go to explore different realms.”

Sif smiled, turning the book over in her hands. “My mother used to read this to me when I was a child…before I came to the capital, that is.”

Sigyn tried to recall what she knew about Sif’s background, but she did not know much other than she had been friends with Thor for nearly two thousand years. “Where are you from in Asgard?”

“Ringsfjord.” Sif answered blandly, pressing her lips together. “I have not been there since I was
“Do you miss it?” Sigyn asked without thinking. She shamed herself for getting caught up in her words. “I apologize. I should not have—“

“Stop that.” Sif commanded bluntly, blue eyes piercing the lady.

“Pardon?” Sigyn asked breathily, terrified that she might have offended her.

Sif rolled her eyes and turned her chair so they faced each other and leaned forwards so their faces were in an even closer proximity. “You go to say something, then stop yourself in the middle of it. Why?”

She folded her hands in her lap, attempting not to give away how frightened she was of Sif’s rage. “It is improper to speak so freely. A lady must put the desires of others before her own.”

Sif’s dark brows came together and she reached to lift Sigyn’s chin. Her fingers were calloused and her hands were strong, yet they showed a certain finesse that she had never noticed in anyone before. She let go once Sigyn was sitting up straight, and their eyes were level. “Do you really think that?”

Her immediate answer would have been yes. But, upon further consideration of Sif’s question, she was not quite so sure.

It was her duty to her family to be a lady. They had offered her at a young age to be one of Queen Frigga’s ladies and the Queen had graciously accepted. There, she was taught and trained to be the kind of lady who was called upon by suitors and gained the attention of High Lords and Princes. And along the way, she had seen the affects of their lifestyle on most of the ladies.

They were the ladies who spent their time gossiping and flashing their titles. Some were shallow, others were more catty and lashed out at those they considered to be threats. Sigyn did not wish to be rude like them. The idea that she may one day sit for hours on end with nothing but her sewing needle and talk of Lady Lorelei’s bust size to keep her happy was just shy of mortifying.

“No.” she answered, forcing herself to meet Sif’s crystal blue eyes. “I don’t.”

“Why?”

“Most ladies do not follow that belief.” Sigyn said quietly, “They are vain. I try not to be.”

Sif nodded, satisfied with her answer, sitting back in her chair. “You know, there’s a difference between vanity and confidence.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, Sigyn at a loss for words when Sif finally sighed. “I do not miss Ringsfjord, however I do miss my parents. I have not seen them in over eight hundred years.”

Swallowing her uncertainty, Sigyn dared ask another question. “Why?”

Sif smiled, opening the cover of the book. “They have disowned me. By law, I am only a part of the military and have yet to gain the title of warrior. The only reason most consider me as such is because of my friendship with Thor. But one day, I will be a woman warrior and I will defend Asgard and her people.”

Sigyn tentatively reached out to touch the back of Sif’s hand, her heart throbbing in sympathy for
the other girl. “Your family has disowned you for wanting to be a warrior?”

She looked down at Sigyn’s hand on hers. “Yes. But they are not my family anymore. I suppose, at the time, I had the potential to marry into great wealth. They did not believe I could do so as a warrior.”

“So when you say that you are not a Lady…?”

Sif laughed lightly and Sigyn found it strangely enchanting. “I suppose it works both ways. By law I am not a lady and nor do I wish to be.”

Sigyn folded her hands in her lap again. “I think, I should like to call you Lady Sif anyhow. Not to be cruel, but because I believe you are the finest Lady Asgard has ever seen. You tolerate so much and are given so little. Your name deserves respect.”

The black haired girl seemed to struggle with words for a moment and her ears felt hot. “Your sentiment honors me Lady Sigyn.”

Sigyn opened her mouth to speak when Loki’s voice suddenly sounded through their corner, distress seeping through his composure.

“I disagree, Darcy! I sincerely doubt that Asgard has had anything to do with the tesseract in the past! I have read everything in this library on the matter and I assure you, no such proof exists.” Loki said, his irritation evident in the hefty slam of a book.

Darcy threw up her arms, almost hitting Jörmungandr in the face. “But it makes sense! You said it yourself, that according to legend, every Infinity Stone was once a part of Yggdrasil before they were scattered across the Nine Realms! If Asgard had anything to do with it, why wouldn’t they put it on Midgard?! A long time ago, primitive people would have worshipped Aesir as gods! Remember the mythology book?”

Loki rubbed a hand over her face, smoothing back his hair. “I have yet to figure out how that book exists. I was not given my title but a year ago and yet it claims I am a god amongst men I could have only met as a babe.”

Darcy brought her hands before her, making rapid gestures. “But don’t you see? Think about it, Lokes. Asgardians could have gone to Earth, then someone already had it figured out what would happen, right? Didn’t you say that some people on Asgard could see the future?”

He scoffed. “Darcy, those are myths. They claim that Jörmungandr, Fenrir and Hel are my children and that I gave birth to a horse. Are you trying to tell me that I have changed my anatomy recently?”

“Loki, you aren’t thinking about it hard enough.” She accused, crossing her arms and running her hands errantly along the spines of a few tomes. “Those are myths and according to ‘Prediction and Misdirection’ by Horft, future telling isn’t always accurate. Plus, humans could have made up some stuff.”

“Darcy,” he tried again. “We are talking about myths. Legends. Things that don’t exist. And contrary to what most may think, I am not a god.”

She took his hands in earnest. “What about Astrid? Huh? She was supposed to be a myth. What about portals between realms or the tesseract or—“

“Darcy—“
“Loki, please.” She encouraged, her pouty lips forming a precious frown.

He sighed, touching her cheek, slowly giving in to her large pleading eyes. “I have told you Darcy, I have read every book in this library concerning Midgard and the tesseract.”

A smile spread across her face, “In this library.”

Sigyn and Sif shared an inquisitive look. “Lady Sigyn?”

“Yes, Lady Sif?”

“Would you care to dine this evening? I heard word from Volstagg there would be fresh fruit from Alfheim to honor a few delegated that have come last night.” Sif asked, promptly standing, a hand on her sword.

Sigyn rose as well, giving Fenrir a quick rub behind his ears. “I would very much like to, Lady Sif.”

At the mention of dinner, Darcy and Loki broke from their bout, and Loki regained his princely persona. He approached Sigyn and took her hand, giving it a kiss. “Would you be offended, Sigyn, if I did not dine with you this evening? I fear I have much work to do before the Allfather awakens and grants me my punishment. And there is a council meeting following the evening meal.”

Sigyn curtsied, “Not at all, Loki. I trust you to be in good hands.” She turned to Darcy, “It has been lovely seeing you as well, Darcy. Shall we meet again in the morn?”

Darcy grinned, shaking her head. “I don’t think so. I’m heading back to Nornheim tonight.”

Loki’s brow crinkled, “Are you?”

She sent him a stern glance. “Yeah. I have things to do. And I have to apologize to Bene—“

“Good night, Sif, Sigyn.” Loki excused them, obviously perturbed by Darcy’s last remark.

The two girls strode away, already deeply engrossed in conversation about fictional story tales and the happenings on Nornheim.

Darcy and Loki stared after their two friends. “Do you think they’re gonna tell anyone what we were talking about?”

“No. I do not think they were paying very close attention.” Loki sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Sigyn is good company, however, she does not take great interest in magic or science.”

“I thought she was taking magic lessons?”

He shrugged, “She enjoys reading at night and thought it would be practical to cast a light to read by.”

Darcy nodded in understanding. “That would be pretty handy…”

They were silent for a minute as they watched Jörmungandr and Fenrir play in the floor.

“So, what other library did you have in mind?” Loki asked, sitting back down in his chair. Darcy plopped down across from him.
“Well, didn’t you say there were a lot of books in your dad’s study? Or, I bet your mom--?”

Without warning, Loki dove forwards to clasp a hand over her mouth, though he had put too much effort into it and had effectively tackled her to the ground. He stayed there with their faces in close proximity so she could hear his whispered warning.

“It is a well known fact in Yggdrasil, Darcy, that no one crosses the Allmother.” Loki cautioned her, staring deeply into her shocked blue eyes that were quickly becoming irritated.

Bitterly, she shook her head, freeing her mouth of his hand. “You’re so weird sometimes. I meant we could ask her if she had any books on it. And maybe we could sneak into Odin’s study. I mean, technically, it wouldn’t be trespassing, right?”

Loki shook his head, “Entering to Allfather’s private chambers to pick through his reading materials? Darcy, that may as well be the definition of trespassing.”

“Yeah, but you’re the prince.”

“No,” he corrected, “I am a prince, as in the second of two princes. As a matter of fact, I am a prince who happens to be in quite a bit of trouble. Getting caught—“

“—if we got caught—“

“—it would put us both in very compromising positions.” He said thoughtfully.

They both sighed and Darcy squirmed a bit, “Hey Lokes?”

“Yes?”

“Can you get off of me? I’m squished.”

Blood rushed to his cheeks and he hastily stood up, offering Darcy his hand. She took it, getting to her feet and brushing out her skirts.

Being around Darcy in Asgard was strange. Most times, when they spent time together in her room, they were always in such close propinquity that he would think absolutely nothing of their social behaviors. On Midgard, those kind of activities were normal, expected even. But acting that way on Asgard seemed wrong.

He was a prince on Asgard and a prince would never do something so uncouth as to tackle a lady. …Even if that lady did the same thing to him nearly every day.

“My apologies.”

She stuck her tongue out at him before settling down next to Jörmungandr and stroking his scaly back. “So...we’re going to check Odin’s study after the council meeting tonight?”

“Of course.” Loki said promptly, smiling in devious mirth. “Do you remember if I ever finished arranging that spell?”

“The super invisibility one? Blocks everything you do from Heimdall?”

“Yes, that one.”

“Yeah, we got it together, like, a few months ago. But it only lasts about five minutes and uses
most of your magic.” Darcy pointed out, pushing a curly lock behind her ear.

Loki cupped his chin, frowning in memory of overworking himself. He had fallen unconscious for nearly an hour. “I remember now.”

Darcy tapped her chin, “I’ve been through it a few times. There’s no real way to simplify it without leaving a gap in the enchantment. It would work great if you were older and you had more magic and stuff.”

He grimaced. This was becoming a problem. As of late, as his knowledge of Yggdrasil and magic progressed, he found it increasingly more difficult to perform the spells he desired. Most magic he used now was based off of spells he invented, or his own theories about manipulating energy. It was not the safest route to go by, considering his methods had not been tested before and involved casting very loose interpretations of spells.

It had come to the point that when he went to perform magic, he need not even cast a full spell. He need only pulse his hand with energy and the desires of his mind would translate the magic required into the preferred spell. It was like reading; he could do it without thinking.

But then, occasionally, he came up with a word he didn’t know…

This had it’s downfall when the spell he wished to cast was too strong and it would weaken him greatly.

“We will go after the meeting. I should be able to go through with the spell, so long as I don’t have to exert much energy afterwards.”

“Okay.” Darcy agreed, stretching her arms and shaking out her feet. “You should eat something first. How long until the council meeting?”

He looked out the window to see the north sun slipping past the horizon. “We should depart soon. It is advised that Thor and I be there beforehand, as we will direct the council in the Allfather’s absence.”

“What about the Allmother?” Darcy inquired, tightening her sword belt. “Won’t she be there?”

Loki began closing the books and magicking them to their proper places. “I do not know. My mother has her own ways to deal with politics.”

Darcy smirked, reaching up to straighten his coat collar. “I think I’ve changed my mind about wanting to be president when I grow up.”

“Have you?” Loki asked surprised, lifting his chin to allow her better access in adjusting his clothing.

“Yup.” She said, popping the ‘p’. “I want to be your mom.”

“You wish to be Queen of Asgard?” he tried to hide his astonishment. He had no doubts that darcy would make a wonderful Queen, but a Midgardian sitting on the throne of Asgard…

Darcy waved him off, kneeling to fix Fenrir’s collar and give Jörmungandr a quick cuddle. “No, I mean, I could, but I want to be Frigga when I get older. She’s amazing.”

He detected her jest and smiled, offering her his arm. “I am not sure even you could do that, Darcy.”
She giggled, accepting his invitation and walking with him out of the library. “I know. I can dream, though.”

Together, they made their way around the palace, Darcy asking him questions about the enormous statues and unique structures they passed. The closer they got to their destination, the slower she walked until they were very nearly creeping through the halls.

Finally, as the entrance to the meeting hall came into view, Darcy stopped completely, her hand tightening on his arm. Loki turned to her, shocked to find slight apprehension in her eyes. “Darcy, what is wrong?”

She pursed her lips, staring straight ahead. “I don’t know…”

He took her hands, “Come now, Darcy. Tell me, what troubles you?”

“it’s just…” she left a short breath gust out from her puffed cheeks. “I’ve never done this before. And everyone in there is a Lord or royalty and they all have lots of experience with this. You’re a prince and I’m…well…I’m just a Midgardian.”

Loki’s heart throbbed at her insecurity and he could not help but blame himself. Who was it that constantly told her she must be stronger? Who was it that always pushed her to fight diligently because she was to go up against mightier races? He had made her doubt herself.

He shook his head vigorously, running a thumb under her eye where anxious tears were starting to build. “Oh no, Darcy, do not think that. Never think that. You are not, nor have you ever been, ‘just’ anything.”

“But it’s true.” She said, her bottom lip coming out in that pretty pout he knew so well. “I am a mortal.”

“Come with me.” He said, taking her hand and pulling her out of the hall and onto a balcony that overlooked the city. With tender care, he positioned her in front of him by the banister. From their place, a view of starry Yggdrasil could be seen, fluid with far away lights and magical colors that made up the Nine Realms. “What do you see?”

“Blurry colors.” She answered grimly. “I still don’t have my glasses.”

Not to be deterred, Loki smiled. “Yes, but you know what those blurry colors are.”

“Yggdrasil.” She sniffed.

“Yes, but also Asgard, and the bifrost, and the gardens. And you know what?” he questioned, noticing how her hand gripped his tighter.

“What?”

“It would be an entirely different place without you here.” He explained, gently turning her to face him. “Asgardians may be older, but that does not mean they are anymore intelligent. Some Aesir assume they have so long to live that they become lazy and forget to educate themselves. And you, Darcy Lewis,” he lifted her chin so that she stood proudly, “you are a part of Yggdrasil just as they are.”

“But I’m mortal.” She protested.

Loki’s gut clenched at the reminder, “You are. But why should that make any difference? You
know how Asgardian politics work, don’t you?”

“Yes…”

“And you have beaten Lord Bjarte at his own game, have you not?”

She smiled at her feet, eyes downcast. “Yeah.”

“Then you have no reason to worry, silly girl.” He said affectionately, dropping her hand. “As far as I’m concerned, you are far cleverer than anyone in that room, with the exception of my mother.”

She looked up at him, humor in her eyes. “What about you?”

He tapped his chin in mock thought. “Hm, well, I suppose I am an exception as well.”

They laughed and when Darcy moved to embrace him, it was only natural that he wrap his arms around her shoulders and rest his cheek against her hair. He swore to himself that he would never again use her mortality as a reason for her limitations. Darcy was far too special, far too brilliant, to think so little of herself. This would never happen again.

He had just noticed that Darcy’s hair smelled different than usual when someone cleared their throat. Hurriedly, he released Darcy and turned to face the one who had interrupted his thoughts.

He was pleased to see the cheery bearded face of Lord Freyar.

“Your Majesty, I was hoping to have a word or two before the meeting began. I am sorry to have intruded.” The Lord said, gesturing with an open hand to their gathering.

Loki gave a curt shake of his head. “It is not problem, Lord Freyar. Please.” He motioned for the Lord to come join them on the balcony. He nodded, stepping from the shelter of the palace, nearer to the banister where he and Darcy stood. “Allow me to introduce a good friend of mine, Lady Darcy. Lady Darcy, this is Lord Freyar of Nornheim.”

Darcy, with not the least bit apprehension in her features, curtsied and Lord Freyar bowed. “Pleased to meet you, Lady Darcy. Prince Loki has told me only the best.”

Loki tried to conceal the heat in his face, but his pale skin hid nothing. “Indeed.”

She grinned in turn, “Well, I am pretty great. I thought that your choice to deny the use of your city’s former resident, Yarse Hjarfadrottir’s open property as a military base in favor of a beautification ground was awesome. Except…you know, dangerous.”

Lord Freyar raised his brows and his gaze shifted briefly to Loki, “You did not jest when you said she was clever, did you?”

“Not at all.” He assured, giving Darcy a smug look.

“Thank you, Lady Darcy. Normally, I would say we need not discuss why it was so dangerous, however, this is the very reason for my intended conversation.”

Loki nodded solemnly, “Speak, if you will.”

Lord Freyar sighed heavily, leaning on the edge of the balcony. “Just after you left, Lord Hakon was found dead on his bathing chambers.”

“What?” Darcy gasped, “But he was High Lord of Demura. That’s, like, the most populated city in Nornheim.”
“Indeed.” Loki muttered, “And he was young. His wife had only borne daughters. According to Nornheim laws they cannot take his place. Which leaves the position of High Lord to—”

“Lord Erlend.” Darcy finished, putting her hands to her hips. “I guess, High Lord Erlend now.”

“Aye.” Lord Freyar agreed gravely. “Prince Loki, you must understand, I would not have been so keen to tell you this if I wasn’t sure you knew what you were doing. But, with the Allfather in the Odinsleep…well, you can see my desperation.”

Darcy rubbed her eyes, “Lord Bjarte has Lord Erlend on leash. He lost a game of Hnefataul. Is he in the capital?”

“Of course.” Loki nearly groaned. “Lord Bjarte had to make sure to send him in.”

Lord Freyar stroked his fluffy beard. “That’s the part that gets me, Lad. Why wouldn’t that Rat Bastard just come himself? Why did he have to send Erlend?”

Loki shook his head, but Darcy grimaced knowingly. “Queen Frigga. He’s terrified of her.”

The lord barked a humorless laugh. “And rightly so. If he brings his tricks…and…”

“…shenanigans.” Darcy offered.

He pointed to her in thanks, “…to the capital, Frigga will have that odd bit of blonde fuzz right off his face.”

Darcy giggled, shooting Loki a sideways glance, “Lord Weird Beard.”

He gave a disapproving shake of his head at both her and Lord Freyar as they chortled over the honesty of her words. “This is quite serious you know.”

The two cleared their throats, adorning more somber expressions. “Right, my apologies, Prince Loki.”

Darcy was still choking back laughter, “Yeah, but what do we do? Lord Erlend will fight for whatever Lord Bjarte wants. Lord Hakon was neutral, Lord Freyar is against the war, and Lord Jarl was for it. The numbers are unbalanced now.”

Loki pressed his fingertips together over his lips. “Yes…yes I know. We will have to proceed as before. I doubt Lord Bjarte will try to engage the capital in battle again, but that will not stop him from attempting to gain use of the bifrost.” He looked towards the doors to the meeting hall and sighed to see many Lords gathering there. “Darcy, any questions you are asked, answer honestly. You may be my friend, but show no bias here. Speak truthfully, speak when asked.”

She leered unhappily, obviously displeased with her lack of say in the conference. “Fine.”

“Lord Freyar, I thank you for your council.” Loki assured, bowing his head.

He inclined his head in return, clapping the young prince on the shoulder. “It is no trouble, Prince Loki. I shall see you later then, yes?”

“I hope so.” Loki said with a small smile.

Lord Freyar turned to Darcy, taking her hand and giving it a scratchy kiss. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Lady Darcy. Keep this one out of trouble, would you?”
She grinned, “I’ll try.”

After he had departed, Loki raised a brow. “Keep me out of trouble?”

“Oh, come on, Mischief, you know it’s true.” She teased, taking his arm.

He led them back into the palace, prepared for the real battle to begin.

Darcy was thoroughly, inexplicably irritated.

Everyone at the council meeting was an idiot and had no idea what they were talking about. Even the Lords who were against a war had limited knowledge of what went on in Asgard. And she could see why, half of them didn’t even seem to be paying attention and most looked like they were thinking about taking a nap.

And to think Loki had to go through this every day….

The meeting table was built in a large circle so she could see every lord and noble at the conference. The space above them was dome shaped with intricate engravings on the ceiling; words and symbols depicted battles and stories of gods.

She was introduced at the beginning of the meeting and was asked to state her purpose before sitting back down and abiding by Loki’s request not to say anything unless asked.

Loki…she felt bad for him. Every delegate from Nornheim happened to be arguing, as did those from Asgard, who desired war. Whether their arguments were valid did not seem to matter. The winner of their bouts might have been who could shout their opinion the loudest.

Loki, Prince of Asgard, was the only member of the capital delegates who was still speaking out. Lord Freyar spoke occasionally, but unlike the others, he only made it a point to rebuttal when he knew what he was going to say.

Thor did nothing. He sat there, looking bored, and effectively making Darcy never want to speak with him ever again.

Sometime during the meeting, Fenrir and Frank made their way into the conference room and Frank made it a point to slither through the center to the circle to Loki’s seat, give him a cuddle, and then get comfy lounging across the back of his chair. Fenrir seemed to be on guard, sitting proudly next to Darcy, his back straight and his ears perked.

Finally, after what seemed like a millennium of waiting, some awesome lord five seats down from her suggested they consult witnesses to the battle on what had happened in Nornheim to further determine if it would be wise to make any certain decisions about Vanaheim without the presence of the Allfather.

“Lady Darcy,” propositioned the Lord.

She stood, looking to him expectantly.

“Will you tell us what transpired in Nornheim concerning Princes Loki and Thor?”

She had one hand on her sword and the other was hanging at her side. “Prince Loki left before the battle to go to the river. Before he left, he gave Prince Thor direction to leave battle to seek
conference with the Lords of Nornheim. Prince Loki went to the river and cast the fog over Nornheim so that the warriors in the field would not be able to fight.”

“And what of Prince Thor?” Another Lord demanded brutally and Darcy leered.

“I’m getting there, hold your horses.” She crossed her arms sassily. She couldn’t really see Loki because she didn’t have her glasses, but she was pretty sure his eye just twitched. “In the meantime, Prince Thor and his friends went to go talk to the High Lords. But, when they entered the city, they were arrested via Chief Guard. So, they fought the guards. The guards surrendered, but they kept fighting. But eventually they were captured and brought to the High Lords.”

Another noble who had not spoken the entire time cleared his throat. That was something else that made Darcy mad, all of these stupid government officials were men. Where were all the women?

“Excuse me, Lady Darcy, but how many friends accompanied Prince Thor?”

“Four.”

A murmur of astonishment went around the table and Darcy wanted to throttle all of them that this of all things was making them talk.

“You are telling me, Lady Darcy,” he clarified, “that five adolescents managed to make the Nornheim Guard surrender?”

Darcy smirked, “Yes. But they kept fighting after that.”

The murmurs increased and Darcy huffed bitterly. The first lord cleared his throat. “Lady Darcy, please finish your account of what happened.”

She nodded in thanks. “Well, while that was happening, Prince Loki entered from the stable entry on horseback and was cornered by the guard. He demanded to see the High Lords. He fought them off, there was one death. After that, he was taken to speak with Lord Bjarte.”

There was a hum of discussion and Darcy tapped her toe with impatience.

“And how do you know all this, Lady Darcy?” the second Lord asked her moodily.

She lifted her chin a bit, “I was with Prince Loki when all this happened.”

There were a few chuckles and even more rumbles of rousing man-gossip that had Darcy ready to tip the table. “With him? How do you mean?”

“I fought with him. I went with him to the river and then we went back down to the city. I disarmed and injured nine men. But then I got stabbed in the leg by some guy I thought was down.” She told them honestly.

Lord Jarl stood. “I can confirm she was injured. Prince Loki carried her before the Lords and he healed her magically after receiving permission for Lord Bjarte.”

There was an affirming mumble from the Lords and Darcy fought the urge to roll her eyes. This was verging on counter-productive. There was a series of loud ‘tsks’ and everyone turned to Lord Erlend. “Aye, forgive me Lady Darcy, but you have not mentioned the means by which Prince Loki murdered.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes, “Loki killed one man using a Refined-Doppelganger Illusion. He cast
twelve corporeal doubles.”

Lord Erlend waved an errant hand and Darcy fought the urge to run at him and poke him with the pointy end of her swords. “Yes yes yes, we know. Prince Loki can use all kinds of fancy little tricks. But, in doing so, he broke many laws on Nornheim. I must ask you, Lords of the council, if it is in your best interest to let princes who break their own laws rule the kingdom? Is it best for boys who play with daggers to decide if Asgard should fight for its glory? Such cowardice should not be tolerated.”

Darcy felt a heavy stone drop in her stomach at the direct offense to her friend. To hell with not speaking. She could break out of prison later. “Loki? A Coward? Wow, just wow. Low blow, Erlend. Low. Blow. That’s slander on His Majesty the Prince of Asgard. Yes, Loki used magic and he fights with daggers. But his intentions in breaking the law on Nornheim were to stop more deaths from happening. And technically, Thor’s crime in not abiding by the surrender of men during a wartime state is a much greater offense than magic.”

The grumbles were reduced to whispers when Erlend retorted, “And who are you to say so, Lady Darcy? Am I to believe that a pretty young thing, such as yourself, would become involved with manly matters such as warring and politics? Forgive me, my lady, but I am not sure you are able enough in your knowledge to completely understand the task at hand. So—“

Darcy’s rage was unprecedented. He had just said she was dumb. He said she didn’t know what she was talking about. Because she was a girl. “Excuse me? I’ll have you know that out of the two of us, which could actually win a simple strategy game?”

Even from a distance she could see Lord Erlend’s face turn red with rage. “And now you bring up irrelevant things, Lady Darcy. I suggest you return to the Ladies Chambers.”

“I will not. Lords of the court, I think it is important to remember what war with Vanaheim will mean for the rest of the Nine Realms. The Allworld is in a very delicate position because of the latest agreement with Alfheim. Their terms are that we do not start war with Vanaheim or they will open attack. Asgard doesn’t have enough overall knowledge of elven magic to win that fight! And Laufey isn’t going to just wait by if there’s war. Asgard is not prepared to fight another war with the Frost Giants.” She said bluntly, her hands on the table and her voice pleading.

The room erupted into bubbling mutters and gruff questions. Darcy could feel Lord Erlend’s stink eye. “Lady Darcy—“

Loki finally spoke from the other side of the table, “Lady Darcy, you speak out of turn. Lord Erlend, I assure you, my actions have not gone unpunished. And neither have Thor’s. That matter was resolved on Nornheim, if you will remember correctly. I will also remind you that I make no official decisions concerning war with other realms. That power resides with the Allfather. Our current goal is to gather our collective thoughts on how this dispute will be settled. And let us not get started on the validity of one’s statements until we know for sure of their sources.”

The room hushed and Darcy decided she liked Loki’s Prince-voice. It was so different to hear his authoritative tone compared to the one he would use when they were together.

Lord Erlend’s charismatic voice carried over the table, light like a butterfly’s, but tainted with the hum of a bee. “Prince Thor, if you don’t mind me asking, what is your take on the war with Vanaheim?”

All heads turned to the blonde haired prince who seemed to be nodding off in his chair. Instantly, he sat up. “Pardon?”
“Your opinion on war with Vanaheim?”

Darcy wanted to bang her head on the table. Multiple times. Of course they would have to ask Thor. Why Thor? He wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box and he was kind of mean sometimes. Though, she had to admit, he was a pretty good fighter and he had a nice face. He cleared his throat a few times, pushing back his hair.

“After our skirmish with Nornheim, I have decided to remain neutral until the Allfather wakes from the Odinsleep.”

What? Thor was neutral? That was unexpected. She thanked the potential gods for giving Thor his brain.

“Thank you, brother, for your input.” Loki said competently and Darcy couldn’t detect any sort of relief or gratification. He simply exuded princely professionalism. “Now, onto the pressing matter of Nornheim’s willingness to come to an agreement…. We, in the capital, are aware of your desires for war with Vanaheim. But, I, on behalf of the council, would like to know if there are any alternatives.”

Lord Erlend seemed offended, “You mean to trick me, Prince Loki?”

“No, Lord Erlend. I wish to negotiate. I asked extra delegates from Nornheim to come into the capital in order to discuss Asgard’s next move.” The Prince said and suddenly, an assembly of Lords became a war between a deviously honest silvertongue and a charismatically conniving butterfly.

“Why should Asgard trust the word of a boy with the title of ‘Liar’?”

“And why must this meeting suddenly be about the authenticity of my word?”

“Does Asgard not pride itself on the deeds of its royalty? If so, we have the reputation of breaking laws and wielding magic.”

“Asgard’s reputation long precedes my doings on Nornheim.”

Their argument made Darcy’s head spin and she was biting her tongue so hard it hurt. At last, she decided that she was going to be a part of their political struggle. “Can’t Asgard’s internal affairs wait? Nornheim is asking to go to war and by requesting permission to use the bifrost, is sort of asking to use the capital’s military. We need some kind of middle ground.”

Lord Erlend sighed, “Again the Lady speaks her whimsical mind.”

Lord Freyar finally spoke up. “I thought the point was made by Prince Loki that we would not question the legitimacy of one’s statements.”

“And I thought the capital knew better than to let simple Ladies into political settings!”

“By the gods, Lord Erlend, you haven’t changed in the slightest, have you?” chimed the sweetest voice Darcy had ever heard.

There, in the entryway, was her one true solace and peace of mind. Queen Frigga, in the flesh. She totally wanted to be Frigga when she grew up. She’d figure it out somehow.

Darcy loved how the entire room silenced and Lord Erlend looked like someone had broken his little social antennae in two. Frigga had a pleasant smile that played on her lips as she walked
around the table, never taking a seat, and demanding everyone’s attention.

“I must say, High Lord Erlend, that your beliefs on the political propensities of ladies are quite outdated. They are Lady Darcy’s main focus of study, you see. And I believe your accusations have offended her. I think it would be best if you apologized for your disrespect.”

Everyone’s head turned to Lord Erlend and Darcy tried not to look too smug when he stuttered out his apology. “Lady Darcy… I… apologize… for my impudence. I had no idea of your studies. You had not said…”

“And nor did she need to. I am sure Loki made it quite clear that you should assume everyone in this conference was able minded enough to be a part of it.” She eyed every man in the room and instantly, all of them sat up straighter and looked very attentive. “As for the Princes’ wrong doings, I can honestly say that they have not gone without punishment. Rest that case. Asgard has more pressing issues than the misgivings of two boys lest you wish more lives to be lost.”

She stopped pacing behind Darcy’s chair and the Queen gazed over the room. “Nornheim delegates, you will send your alternative propositions in to me by tomorrow afternoon and after that, we will gather again to discuss what is next for Asgard. By this time tomorrow, the Allfather will have risen. Meeting Adjourned.”

Everyone looked to Queen Frigga, dumbfounded. She eyed them expectantly until they began to disperse. Darcy leapt up, turning to the Allmother in awe. “Your Highness.”

Frigga smiled, rubbing Fenrir’s ears as he relaxed from his defensive pose. “Good evening, Darcy. Are you having a good time?”

Darcy leapt up, unable to form proper words. “I, uh… I… Politics… you… do you have any books on Aesir-Midgardian interactions?”

Worry flashed in her eyes for a moment before Loki approached them. “Mother, Lady Darcy.”

Frigga regained her pretty grin, but it seemed as though a weight had been placed upon her lips, like she had remembered something that made her words almost difficult to say. “I do. I can give them to Loki in the morning for you to look over. Though, I ask you to be careful with that information, Lady Darcy. Not everyone is privy to such knowledge.”

Darcy nodded and Loki looked like he was going to collapse. Frigga brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Goodnight, Darling. Get some rest tonight, yes?”

“Yes Mother.”

She inclined her head to them both and Darcy nearly fell when she curtsied. As the Queen walked away, Loki turned to his friend, “Darcy, did you really just ask the Allmother for—?”

“Yes.” Darcy answered, still wide eyed and slack jawed.

Loki sighed, his brows coming together as the last Lords left the hall. “I am sorry for getting you mixed up in this. I should have just let you go home this morning.”

This slapped Darcy out of her wonder-filled haze. “What are you talking about?”

He paced to the nearest open window followed closely by Frank. “Lord Erlend might be the one in the capital, but he speaks with Lord Bjarte’s words. He indirectly proposed a royal reform and then used you to further his point.”
Darcy joined him by the window, huffing angrily. “Tell me about it! That was the most sexist thing I’ve ever heard! Do most people in Asgard think like that?”

Loki shook his head. “In Nornheim it is a more common conception than in any other province. The Norns have always been a bit rough. But Lord Erlend’s take is a very old belief. Half of Nostrond is governed mostly by ladies.”

“Good.” She sighed, leaning her head against the window frame and letting the wind cool her hot skin. “I thought you usually didn’t talk much during meetings?”

“Typically I do not.” He told her, mindlessly petting Frank’s scales. “However, when Asgard is in need of my voice, I shall use it.” His green eyes looked to her and Darcy’s breath caught for the barest second. Loki looked different. This wasn’t Loki who she had to poke awake in the morning and who combed his hair three times just to make sure it didn’t stick up in any places.

This was Prince Loki of Asgard who rode a half dead horse to battle and went to war in court with only his words as defense.

But his eyes were the same. No matter how much Loki lied, or how much Mischief he caused, his eyes were always wide and honest and all too easy to trust.

Darcy took his hand, “Come on, we can break into Odin’s study some other time. You need to sleep.”

He squeezed her fingertips, “Would you like me to take you home?”

“Yeah.” she yawned, leaning on him a little as they walked. “Eat first, though.”

“Very well.”

They walked in silence for a while, Fenrir trailed closely behind them, Frank coiling around their feet. Darcy was considering whether the deeds of Loki’s great-grandfather, Bor, were grand enough to get him so many big statues. Would Odin get a statue like that? Would Frigga? Frigga deserved, like, fifty statues.

“Darcy?” Loki asked as they approached the dining hall.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She said immediately, then looked to him inquisitively. “Wait, for what?”

He smiled a little, the corners of his lips twitching was they entered the spacious feasting area. Most had stopped eating quite so much, choosing instead to dance and drink. “For not letting Lord Erlend get the best of you. You did not succumb, even throughout all his allegations.”

“Phht, of course not. Don’t thank me for that, Lokes.” Darcy pulled him to the end of the table where she piled him a plate full of meat, vegetables, cheese, and bread. “Eat.”

Loki waited for her to be seated next to him before sitting in his own chair and picking up his flatware. Darcy served herself some of the same stuff, along with a rose pastry. After a few minutes of eating in silence, Loki looked up from his plate. “I am envious of Midgard, Darcy.”

She finished chewing her last bite of bread before responding. “Why?”
“Because they will get to have you on their congress. I wish Asgard had more dedicated people running it.” He thought aloud, taking a sip from his water goblet.

Darcy sighed heavily, clapping him on the shoulder in a very Thor-like fashion. “Well, you know what they say, you can’t always get what you want.”

“That’s not fair.” Loki said in mock offense, a grin stretching across his face, the tired distress in his eyes lessening. “I complimented you, now you have to give one back.”

“Life isn’t fair.” Darcy said through a bite of pastry, a teasing smirk already in place.

They laughed through the rest of their meal, staying until nearly everyone had departed and cracking their ribs over pointless jokes and stories they had both heard a hundred times that still managed to spark humor in their guts.

Finally, when Darcy had yawned one too many times and Loki remembered the long day he had ahead of him tomorrow, he lead them to the stables where he called forth Hel to take Darcy home.

They didn’t talk on the way there, but the air around them hummed in contentment. In spite of the pressuring events of Asgard’s political setting, they still had each other to get through whatever the universe had to throw at them.

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“Who is she?”

“Who?”

“You know very well who.” Odin nearly growled, standing by the window in his nightwear.

Frigga raised her brows at her irritable and early awakened husband. “Loki’s friend? Lady Darcy of Nornheim.”

“I am aware of what she calls herself.” He said, “Though I would like to know who exactly is cavorting around with the Princes of Asgard!”

The Queen pressed her lips together, “Have no worry of Lady Darcy. I am seeing to the matter personally.”

“Frigga....”

She raised her brows at him and he relented, breathing a sigh of reluctance. “Alright, fine. Just promise me the next time Loki decides to take her into a meeting you will tell me first so I can make sure Lord Erlend knows his place regarding who is allowed to be in the council.”

“Very well.” the Allmother promised. “You would not stop Loki from letting her in?”

“Of course not.” Odin said stiffly. “He is a prince. It is his right to allow whoever he likes stand in at council meetings unless I explicitly say otherwise.”

A slight smile formed on her lips as she watched Odin’s face contort through his thinking process.

“What am I going to do with them?” The Allfather questioned himself with a sigh. “One son fights too much, the other too little. Both break the law and neither simply went on with the battle as it was supposed to be fought.”
Frigga stood, walking to stand beside her husband and grasp his hand. “And who does that remind us of, hm?”

He made a gruff sound of objection as the queen’s chiming laughs filled the room. “Frigga, why could you not have given Loki his punishment as well?”

She sighed, leading him away from the window and onto the chaise. “Because, I could not think of one. Thor’s was easy.”

“Yes, I am aware. Usually you leave me the simple tasks.” Odin grumbled moodily, though his tone was light.

“You need practice. You are getting older, you know.” She teased with a sly grin.

“I? An old man?” he smiled, only to have it falter. “I suppose I shall take away his freedoms for some time. Not his magic…” he added hurriedly, “But he does spend a considerable amount of time out of the palace.”

“If that is what you deem fit.” Frigga said blankly.

Odin shook his head, giving her hand a squeeze and patting it affectionately. “I thought you said, back when Thor was new born, that you were better suited than I to deal out punishments?”

“I am.”

“Then why has the burden been set to me?” he asked incredulously.

“As I said before, you need practice.” she said simply. “Your punishments are awful. They all include taking away things. I fear one day Loki may speak too freely and you will sew his mouth shut to rid him of speech. Or that Thor will one day abuse his position and you will take away his power.”

Odin scoffed. “Having one’s mouth sewn is not quite so terrible and I doubt I would ever take away Thor’s power unless Asgard would truly be better off without him.”

“And so my fears are not without reason.” she muttered tiredly, leaning back against the pillows of the lounge.

They sat in silence for a long moment before Odin cleared his throat. “Frigga?”

“Yes?”

He hesitated, “I know...I understand that…” he made an irritated sound, shifting in his seat. “I do not know how to ask.”

Frigga waited with a humored expression.

Odin released her hands and stood, facing the wall. “How powerful is Loki exactly?”

The Allmother’s eyes narrowed. “Quite.”

“That tells me nothing.”

“What is it that you wish to be told?” She countered.

“Do not turn this on me, I asked but a simple question.” he insisted, turning to her, the golden light
of the room shining off the metal of his eye patch.

Frigga’s features tightened, “A question is innocent enough, but the intentions of such a question I would suggest otherwise.”

“As you have said in the past, Frigga, he is my son!” he scorned, bringing back his shoulders.

“But you do not trust him.” She accused knowingly. “Even though he has done you no wrong, you do not trust him.”

They stayed in utter silence, glaring at each other through squinted eyes. “I wish to know how much power the boy possesses. Please.” Odin said slowly, punctuating each syllable.

Frigga pursed her lips. “He is still growing. And with his growth, his magic manifests. As of now, he is possibly one of the strongest, skilled, and able sorcerers in Asgard. Though he does not know this.”

Odin gaped, “How? How did he come by such power?”

“Magic progression is similar to muscle growth.” Frigga explained unenthusiastically. “The more he practices, the stronger he becomes. This development is heightened during his adolescence.” the stony look in her eyes softened, “He is quite special, you know? His use of magic...well...it reminds me of yours.”

Odin sneered defensively, “I do not use magic.”

“Do not tell me lies, Darling.” Frigga chided. “You know very well that occasionally you use power through Gungnir, just as Thor will one day learn to use his through Mjolnir.”

The King cleared his throat, “That is different.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” she agreed rigidly. “Still, they are very much the same. Loki does not cast spells like most sorcerers would. He need not think of a specific spell if he has cast it once already.”

“And am I to believe you had no part in this?” Odin queried, turning away from her again.

“I do not care what you believe.” Frigga said promptly. “I had no more part in Loki’s magical abilities than you had in Thor’s skill in combat. We taught them enough to guide them on their paths of study. You asked to know of his capabilities and I have told you. Would you also like to know what he eats for breakfast?”

“You twist my words.”

“Your words are far too warped to be twisted by the likes of me.” She glared up at him, waiting. “Speak plainly, husband. Delicacy was never your strongest suit.”

Odin sighed, not quite defeated. But his resolve no longer held firm. “You are wrong. I do trust him. I trust Loki.” he moved to the pedestal on which Gungnir was placed before he fell into the Odinsleep and picked up his staff. “But--”

“You do not trust the Frost Giant.” Frigga nearly spat.

“No.” the Allfather said firmly. “I do not.” he turned to the window and glared at the ever present stars of Yggdrasil. “He will not leave the capital for the entire summer. I may change my mind if
there is another rebellion. Gods forbid I send Thor alone.”

Chapter End Notes

Woah, look, an update!
So, I realized that I have taken kind of a really long time to go through everything that's happening with Nornheim and Asgard's internal affairs. It's not that this chunk of writing is super essential to plot as it is to development of characters and their relationships. My main goal in all of this is to get a very strong message across about how the different characters react in certain situations or what their strong suits are. Also...there are some cute things...that are cute...that I just...they had to be done.

Um, a quick apology...
I'm bad at transferring documents onto AO3. So, if there are any formatting errors or grammatical errors, I'm working on it. I think I got them all, but I always miss a few especially in longer chapters.

Thank you everyone for reading! I totally appreciate all kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I love it when people comment because it gives me an excuse to drool over tasertricks more-so than I already do.
Chapter Summary

Loki rides a bike. It's a puzzle? It's a puzzle! Thor talks to Tyr.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Darcy, I am not sure this is the best idea.”

“Relax, Lokes. Just don’t look down.”

Loki did as she said, keeping his eyes on the empty stretch of road before him and squeezing the handlebars of Darius’ black bicycle. Darcy stood to the side and slightly behind him, one hand on the small of his back and the other holding the center of the handlebars.

It was late October and they had still not gone on their intended trip to Nidavellir. The morning after he had returned Darcy to Midgard on her last visit to Asgard, Odin had awoken from the Odinsleep and declared Loki’s punishment was that he should not leave the capital for the entire summer.

Naturally, Loki had been nonplussed about his situation. An Asgardian summer without Darcy seemed…utterly impossible. And there was no way he could leave her on Midgard alone.

That was the first time Loki directly disobeyed the Allfather’s command.

It wasn’t like he wanted to defy his father. But the bare thought of staying in the palace for five Midgardian months was torture. So, he devised a plan.

Firstly, he chose never to travel to another realm besides Midgard. If he dared pass onto the soil of any other world, they would no doubt recognize him and he would be in even deeper trouble. Instead, whenever he wished to see Darcy, he would cast a double of himself to sit in his room or alone in the library, reading books and teleport to the portal to Midgard.

Though, he did not put quite so much effort into his doppelgangers as he had Darcy’s. Doubles required energy. The more complex the doubles actions and character, the more magic needed. Being that he had to magic himself several miles, he chose to use his energy sparingly.

As of late, he had been spending more and more time alone. He and Sigyn remained friends and twice a week they would gather in the library for talk of fantasy and her growing friendship with Sif. It was strange to Loki that the fiercest warrior in training and the prettiest of ladies should become friends. Nevertheless, it made him happy to see Sigyn walk with pride in her step and a friend who shared her passions. In spite of their limited time together, Loki still favored Sigyn and he found himself occasionally wondering what lengths he would have to go through to court her once he furthered in his adolescence.

No doubt Lady Sigyn deserved nothing but the best and that was what he would provide.

As for teleporting such a great length just to reach the portal to Midgard…
It was no small feat. He considered, at first, creating a portal inside the palace. The fabric between realms was made of thinner stuff than distance. He would no doubt be able to create a portal to Midgard…with enough power. Therein lay his problem. He was still young, and again he faced the challenge of performing spells too potent for his capabilities.

According to his and Darcy’s calculations, he would be able to fully open a portal in fifteen years, give or take a few months. Darcy would be twenty seven. At that rate, he would be able to teleport between realms before he was able to open a portal.

So, unable to use a passage directly from his bedroom, Loki would conjure a double and then use the rest of his magic to hazardously teleport to the passage that led to Darcy’s bedroom. From there, they continued their studies on Midgard.

But now, he was facing a true challenge.

After reading the book the Allmother had given them, both he and Darcy had been entirely confused.

The book was absolute gibberish. Pure gobbledygook. The language changed thirty times per page and sometimes, the words used weren’t real, nor had they ever been. Darcy kept saying that there must be some way to decipher such a text and Loki kept arguing that it was nonsense bound in leather.

Darcy, never to be deterred, studied the ridiculous material for hours on end, searching out the barest of details. Loki, though he certainly had no interest in the book, helped her, only to become frustrated when they could not gather anything from its yellowing pages.

He insisted that they should search for answers through his mother and Darcy insisted they check Midgard. Why she believed all the answers rest on Midgard, he had not the slightest idea. But she did. And that is why he was learning how to ride a bicycle. Because after an entire summer of poring over that foolishness, Darcy demanded they go to a Midgardian library to search for answers. This time, they actually knew where they were going.

“So this is the brake…” Darcy nodded to the silver lever, the edge of her stiff grey jacket poking him in the cheek.

“Darcy, I know the mechanics of a simple bicycle,” he said, shifting awkwardly on the seat. He was wearing black jeans and a dark green turtle neck sweater with the sleeves pushed up. On his head was an annoying Midgardian contraption called a helmet, which Darcy was adamant about him wearing, in case he was hit by a car.

“I’m just trying to teach you how, calm down,” she huffed, taking her hand from his back to push her glasses up her nose.

Loki sighed, bringing his feet to the pedals. “You have been instructing me for the past five minutes. I would like to actually try riding it now.”

He could feel her smirk on the side of his head as he stared at the road before him, aware that Jörmungandr and Fenrir were making noises at each other behind him. “Alright. I’ll let you go on the count of three and remember to keep pedaling. Ready?”

“I am always ready.”

“Liar,” she teased, already loosening her grip. “One.”
He began to pedal slowly and Darcy jogged alongside him.

“Two.”

He pedaled faster, thinking about the balance required for a bicycle. Surely it must not be harder than the balancing exercises he was forced to do in his combat training. As long as he kept moving, he should make it.

“Three!” Darcy cried, letting go and allowing him to fly forwards.

Loki kept pedaling, his eyes squinted shut in preparation for the inevitable fall Darcy had told him of. But it never came. He was still moving.

In fact, it was fairly easy. Pedaling was no trouble and as for balance? He had experienced far worse.

“Loki!” Darcy called, jumping on her own bike and riding after him. “You’re doing it!”

He smiled smugly, looking down as Fenrir and Jörmungand r ran beside him. “I told you it would be no problem, Darcy.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” she said, falling into place on his other side. “Keep talking. We’re going to the library now. Once we get into town, we have to ride on the sidewalks.”

“Very well,” he agreed, tentatively releasing his hold on the handlebars.

Darcy gasped, “How are you doing that!? You seriously just learned how to ride a bike!”

“I told you, I have excellent balance,” he reminded her, adjusting his position on the blasted seat.

“Uh huh,” she said, swerving her front tire so he had to quickly grab the handle bars to avoid collision.

Once he regained stability, he looked up to raise a self-righteous brow. “I’m sorry, but was that meant to discourage me? It was a very cute attempt, I will give you that,” he teased and Darcy laughed.

“Cute? I’m not cute.”

“I beg to differ, Darcy. You are very cute.”

“Fine,” she said indignantly. “Then you’re cute too.”

He smirked at her, “Darcy, I am a Prince—“

“—a cute prince.”

“Princes are not cute.”

Darcy let one hand off her handlebars to reach up and tap her chin. “Hm. I don’t know. Thor is pretty darn cute.”

Loki’s eye twitched and his bike wiggled a bit, forcing him to put his hands on the handlebars. “What? Thor? Thor is not cute!”
“Thor? Oh yeah,” Darcy corrected. “His face is adorable.”

“But…he is Thor!” Loki exclaimed, completely confused. He understood that the word ‘cute’ on Midgard had a couple interpretations, the first being that something was attractive in an endearing way. Like Darcy. He thought Darcy was very cute in that regard. Except when she opened her mouth and annoying words came out. It happened more often than not.

Then the other definition, the more secular meaning amongst younger Midgardians, was to call someone attractive in a way that meant they have captured your fancy. Now, he did not know if she was using the word in context to the connotation or the denotation.

Darcy sighed sadly, “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

He shook his head, deeming it best to change the subject lest he wish to die from shock. Darcy, of all people, could not find Thor attractive in that sense! No doubt Thor would leap at the opportunity to court her and that was simply unacceptable.

Darcy seemed to sense his inner turmoil and snorted. “Loki, I’m joking.”

“What?”

She grunted as they started up a hill that led to the end of the street where they could carry over into town. “I was kidding, you nut. Thor’s cute, but he’s not that cute.”

Loki relaxed a little as they made it to the top of the hill and continued on their way to the library. As it turns out, the library was not that far away, only twenty minutes by ride if they stayed on the sidewalks. When they arrived there, Darcy took from her backpack two brightly colored cables and locked their bikes to a metal rack. “It’s to keep people from stealing them,” she explained.

“So I assumed.”

They had no trouble getting there. It was only once they entered the library that real problems ensued.

“You can’t bring animals in here!” cried a dumpy looking woman with fluffy brown hair and too much Midgardian make up on her face.

Darcy and Loki looked at each other, then down at Fenrir and Jörmungandr who were staring up at them with their mouths open and tongues lolling out in identical expressions of excitement.

“Why?” Darcy asked.

“Because this is a library,” said the woman firmly. “Not a zoo! Now get those beasts out of here or I will call the police! Is your dog even on a leash!? And that SNAKE! I—!”

Loki waved a hand and a flash of green went over the woman’s eyes. Loki quirked a tiny grin as a wide welcome smile dawned on her face. He spoke to her softly, “I’m sorry Miss, but my friend and I need these animals for our studies. Would it be too much trouble if we were to take them with us?”

The librarian shook her head, the thick glasses on the end of her nose nearly flopping off. “It isn’t a problem.”

“Thank you,” Loki whispered, patting her shoulder. “I will alert the rest of the staff.”
Darcy blinked as the woman returned to her desk and Loki held his arm out for Jörmungandr to slide onto. “Loki, what did you do?”

He offered her a timid smile. “I didn’t take control of her mind, if that’s what you are asking. It was merely an illusion.”

Darcy considered this.

What classified as an illusion was the most indefinite science in the realm of magic. It was fairly easy to determine if more physical things were illusions or not. Any kind of double he cast was an illusion of himself, corporeal or not. Any kind of material he made that was mimicked from another object was an illusion, even if you could touch it or feel it.

Illusions were simple to categorize so long as they were not part of thought.

With that woman, he had not truly changed her mind. Deep down, she still believed that shouting in a library and discriminating against animals was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Loki had merely cast a temporary illusion over her mind that she did not think that. It would not affect how she thought about anything else except the presence of Fenrir and Jörmungandr.

Finally, she sighed. “It was an illusion. But don’t do it again, okay? I don’t think it’s right. It’s cheating at something that doesn’t need to be won.”

Loki remembered her time with Lord Bjarte and was instantly remorseful. She was right. Controlling the minds of others, even through an illusion…it just seemed wrong. Quickly, he released the illusion on the librarian as Darcy told Fenrir and Jörmungandr to go back home. They both whined sadly before scampering/slithering away.

Darcy showed the lady at the counter her library card before they headed off into the information section of the Midgardian archives.

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Thor was fairly irritated.

Now, Thor Odinson was well aware he was not quite as good at political debates as his brother. Loki was soft-spoken, authoritative when need be, and very strange in terms of combat.

But the reason for Thor’s irritation was not that Loki had all of these attributes, but rather they were so much more defined than his.

It was almost expected of a Prince to receive publicity, be it good or bad. Loki’s was always a mix. The Realm Eternal would shadow over in talk of Loki’s most recent deeds. No one truly knew the details because most of Loki’s dealings were done behind the closed doors of a meeting room.

This left everyone curious.

Every citizen of Asgard knew of Loki’s practice of magic, his cunning and wit. But they had never seen it. His publicity was an enigma for the people of Asgard. He was the dark prince, the suspicious one. The news of Prince Loki’s deeds was always whispered, as if spreading the word of a liar. Word of his disobedience in Nornheim had permeated the streets of the capital like poison in the air. Even reports of his political accomplishments were shaded.

Whereas Thor, everything he did was always out in the open. His attendance to the funerals of those he had killed had done more to earn him the title of ‘Golden Prince’ than anything. He found
wherever he went, that he was honored and respected as a spectacular warrior. That he was truly
learning the ways of a King by humbling himself at the funerals of those he had killed.

And in all of that, Thor wondered: Who was the capital’s greatest lie?

Thor wanted to be a warrior. He wanted to fight for Asgard and her people. He did not wish to be
honored for killing Asgardians. He wanted to receive the right kind of glory by defending Asgard
against opposing threats.

That is why today he planned to meet with the Allfather to discuss his take on the potential war
with Vanaheim. He was still so confused. Was Vanaheim a threat to Asgard? Was Asgard a threat
to Vanaheim? Everyone he asked said something different. Lord Erlend contradicted everything
Loki said and more. Loki contradicted what Lord Erlend said and then gave him several political
documents that made his head hurt to read.

That is why he was going to speak with the Allfather now. He needed a straight answer. That way,
he wouldn’t make the same mistake he did in Nornheim.

“Prince Thor of Asgard.” A guard announced him as he stepped into his father’s study.

“Father,” Thor greeted, giving a slight bow. Odin Allfather was sitting at his desk and next to him
sat a man with light brown hair and a strong jaw.

“Thor,” The Allfather returned, gesturing to the chair before his desk. The golden prince
approached the chair without question and the man with light brown hair stood, revealing his
shining silver armor. “This is High Lord Tyr of Thryheim. I have called him here on short notice to
discuss all that you wish to know about war.”

Thor blinked a few times. “I…I thought that you were to tell me of the skirmish between us and
Vanaheim.”

Odin stood, Gungnir standing tall beside him. “An explanation from a biased man is never the true
account,” he said simply, leaving the room without another word.

Thor stared blankly after his Father, prepared to throw Mjolnir at something for the amount of
distress this damn conflict was putting him through. A low chuckle brought him back as Tyr
settled himself in the chair next to Thor’s. “Cheeky, isn’t he?”

“What?” Thor asked, taken back. He had heard the Allfather been called a great many things,
‘cheeky’ was not typically one of them.

Tyr smiled, his white teeth shining on his shaven face. “Odin. He’s absolutely ridiculous
sometimes. Stubborn too. I fought with him in the war. He was like an uncle, or a father even.
You’re lucky to have him.”

Thor nodded respectfully. “Many thanks.”

Tyr smiled again and Thor cocked his head curiously at the Lord. It was always difficult to tell
how old someone was on Asgard. They could look the most youthful person in the word and be
older than Odin depending on when they ate their apple. But Lord Tyr just seemed too…young.
The way he smiled and laughed made him seem too childish to have fought in the Great War.

But there was something more too. Lord Tyr looked oddly familiar. The edge of his nose and the
shape of his jaw….
The Lord seemed to sense Thor’s skepticism. “You wonder what makes me worthy of explaining war strategy to a prince?”

“I mean no disrespect,” Thor assured quickly. “I just…you seem…younger.”

Lord Tyr shrugged. “I am young, I suppose. I was not yet of age when the war began and I started fighting. I neared the end of my adolescence just after we won the war. Battle strategy has been my life. I would not be who I am today without it.”

Thor’s mouth sagged open in awe. “You fought Frost Giants before you were of age?”

“I’m afraid so,” Tyr sighed, brown eyes reflecting the feeling of past horrors onto the young prince. “It is not a time I like to remember.”

Thor nodded slowly, once again caught up in how familiar looking Lord Tyr was. But he couldn’t place his finger on it…

“So, Prince Thor, you wish to further understand this skirmish with Vanaheim?” Tyr asked, bringing them back on topic.

“Yes,” Thor confirmed, “I have never been one for politics. I wish to be a warrior, and to fight for my people. Unfortunately, the last time I thought I was fighting for my people, I ended up fighting with my people. I do not wish to end up in that situation again.”

Tyr nodded, lips pursed. “And what do you know of the feud?”

Thor leaned forwards on his knees and ran a hand through his hair. “See, that is my problem. I do not know. High Lord Erlend of Nornheim claims that fighting Vanaheim is fighting for Asgard’s honor and to remind the people of Yggdrasil of Asgard’s might. We would fight to honor our people.

“My brother, Prince Loki, says Vanaheim has done nothing to wrong us and starting war with them would most definitely mean an outbreak of war in the Nine Realms. He says Asgard is not fully prepared to fight so many different races.”

Tyr nodded slowly, listening to Thor’s words and taking them in with great care. “It seems you have looked into this.”

“I have,” Thor assured. “I do not wish to repeat my actions on Nornheim.”

“Understandable,” Lord Tyr agreed with a sigh. “Before I explain anything to you, Prince Thor, you must recognize that being a neutral party is not always easy. Both sides have tempting offers that would be so easy to take if you swayed to one side or the other. But you must look into the heart of what you are doing and decide if it is right. I, being a High Lord, must look out for what is best for my people. That usually involves staying neutral.”

Thor’s brows came together. “With all due respect, Lord Tyr, I am a Prince. I cannot simply stay neutral.”

“No,” Lord Tyr said. “You cannot.”

He shifted in his seat so he could cross his legs. “Asgard has not had a war since you were a babe. That is not extremely long, but it is long enough for those who missed the Great War to long for glory and titles. There are always such inspiring stories that go around after a war. Average men become heroes. Average women birth honorable warriors and the pride in one’s own realm
heightens. Not to mention, war is extremely good for the economy. Though, Asgard is in no need of it currently.

“Warring with Vanaheim would no doubt bring Asgard all of these things.”

Thor nodded, lifting Mjolnir onto his lap. “Then why is it Loki insists otherwise?”

Tyr waved a finger. “I am not finished yet. Your brother makes an excellent point. Warring with Vanaheim could potentially mean the beginnings of another Great War if the treaty with Alfheim is not corrected. It is difficult to say either way. Vanaheim is made up of so many tribes, some may fight with you, and others may join up and strike you down. If another Great War happens, Asgard may or may not be prepared for it depending on the terms of alliance. Many lives would be lost.”

Thor grasped his chin, thinking it over. It made more sense now, the fight of glory against safety. “Do those who want the battle with Vanaheim know of the consequences?”

“Some,” Tyr said lightly, flashing a familiar smile. “Some do not. More believe that Laufey is bluffing.”

The golden prince let Tyr’s explanation sink in. “Then which side do I choose? What do I believe?”

Tyr quirked a wayward smile. “That, Prince Thor, is for you to decide. No one can tell you who to fight for or what to believe in, even if you are a prince.”

“But what about you?” Thor asked. “If my father asked you to fight for him, would you do it?”

“Of course,” Tyr answered immediately. “If Odin asked me to fight for him, I would march forth, no questions asked. But I do not think he will.”

“Why not?”

Tyr sighed, leaning back in his chair and tapping the armrests with his fingertips. “Odin has asked me to fight with him only once before. We have fought together so many times I cannot count, but only once did he ever ask me to. It was the day of the fight that ended the war.”

Thor leaned forwards, anxious to hear about the heroic deeds of those who had fought before him.

“The day prior I had been burned badly across my chest. The touch of a Frost Giant is so cold it will blacken your skin. My muscles were stiff with arctic chill and I could hardly move without remembering the blow of King Laufey,” Tyr recalled, a grimace spilling across his features.

“You still live? After being attacked by Laufey?” Thor asked in sheer amazement.

The man who still looked too young to hold such knowledge of war, smiled modestly. “Yes. I suppose so. Well, Odin came to me that morning while I hastily rubbed the little Essence of Fray that was left in our supplies over my chest and he said to me, ‘Tyr, I would not ask you to fight with me today, if I wasn’t sure that you’re the best chance we’ve got at overpowering them.’

“Understand that we had lost many people. The cost to us was just as great as it had been to Jotunheim. Most of the Asgardian generals and commanders were still alive so my surprise when Odin asked me to fight with him that day was tremendous. He bid me to lead the siege on Laufey’s palace. And I did as he asked,” Tyr finished.

Thor’s mouth was gaping in admiration. “It had to hurt.”
Tyr laughed aloud, “It did! I could hardly move for a fortnight.” He smiled at the memory. “I came home to Ringsfjord, back when I lived there with my family. Within the next hundred years, Odin had declared me High Lord of Thryheim.”

The young prince nodded in acknowledgement of the Lord’s achievements. “And through all of that, you do not think he would ask you to go to war?”

Tyr gave a boyish shrug. “I do not believe so. Through all of my time with Odin, I do not think he would bring Thryheim into something we do not believe in. Thryheim has many sides, but you’ll find the most predominant one is that we are lousy fighters without the right motivation.”

Thor snorted. “I feel the same way about my brother. He cannot fight worth a damn unless it is for something important. And then suddenly, he manages fantastical feats with a bit of magic and a few daggers.”

Tyr smiled, “I have heard much of Prince Loki. Though, I must say, most have just been rumors. Tell me, is it true he brought a woman into a council meeting? And that she mouthed off Lord Erlend?”

“Yes,” the blonde prince said cautiously, unsure of what Lord Tyr’s reaction would be.

“Good,” The High Lord affirmed. “Bastard deserved it. I don’t know how he even holds his opinions with Queen Frigga in the palace.”

Thor was quite conflicted. He had spoken with Lord Erlend on Nornheim and he seemed a perfectly reasonable man. Energetic, spritely, polite…

But from the moment the entered the actual political setting, he had turned sour. Thor wasn’t wonderful at politics, but he knew enough to understand that Lord Erlend was insulting Loki on the highest degree and taking Lady Darcy for granted. Though, at the time, he had not words to defend either of them and had instead favored a nap.

“I wonder as well,” he agreed, simply to keep the peace.

“Yes…” Lord Tyr trailed off in thought, coming back to his senses. “Anyhow, do you have any more questions on war?”

“I do not think so. Yet I am still unsure of what opinions to hold,” he said in frustration. “I wish to fight, to earn glory for Asgard, but I would not want to go against the wishes of my people to do so.”

“The answer will come to you in time, Prince Thor,” Lord Tyr assured, standing and clapping the young prince on the shoulder. “You may write me anytime for advice or questions you may have.”

Thor was surprisingly warmed by this. Unlike most Lords of the court, there was something so free and caring about Lord Tyr that he found refreshing. “I will.”

High Lord Tyr turned to leave and then stopped, looking back at Thor with uncertainty. “Prince Thor? Might I ask you a question?”

“But of course, Lord Tyr.”

He cleared his throat. “Do you know of a young woman, in the palace? Sif?”

Sif! That is who Lord Tyr looked like! He and Sif both had the same shape of eye and mouth. And
they both sat like they had such noble purpose. "Yes, she is one of my closest friends and a fine warrior."

This seemed to excite Tyr, though he was trying very hard to hide it. His youthful face gave away everything. "Is she really? How does she fight? Is she well?"

Thor had never seen such enthusiasm for Sif’s training before. It gave Thor that much more reason to like Tyr. "She is well, she fights with a double edged sword. She can best nearly any man."

"That is most wonderful news." Lord Tyr’s eyes glimmered with amazement and a kind of nostalgia that made Thor quite sad.

He spoke in earnest. "If you would like to see her, Lord Tyr, I’m sure she would be delighted to meet you. Or, I suppose you already know her then."

He shook his head, eyes downcast. "No…no I’m afraid I am not truly allowed to see her until she is of age." The sorrow was plain on his face. "I used to visit her every summer in Ringsfjord when she was younger and before our father…well…perhaps she has told you?"

Thor nodded solemnly. He was one of the very few people that knew the truth of Sif’s state. How her parents had disowned her for being a warrior. Though he had not known her family consisted of such influential people. "Shall I tell her you asked after her?"

Tyr smiled politely, "No. Do not say it was me. Tell her only that she is a little sun that shines brightly, much like her hair."

Thor could not help a heavy chortle. "Actually, she has black hair now. She had an…ah…accident with my brother Loki."

"Really?" Tyr inquired, eyebrows disappearing in his hairline and he laughed with uninhibited enthusiasm. "It suits her! My little shieldmaiden was always looking to stand out! Tell her instead to keep on showing Asgard what it needs in its warriors! And the day she is declared part of the elite forces, I will be there!"

Thor bowed just slightly. "It would be my honor."

Tyr clapped him on the shoulder. "Thank you, Prince Thor, truly. I would be happy to give you any advice if needed. And you will always be welcome in Thryheim."

"No, Thank you Lord Tyr. You have been far more helpful than anyone else in this realm."

They bowed to each other again, before Tyr strolled from the room, an endearing grin plastering his face.

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Loki snapped shut his own reference book, thoroughly irritated. "Darcy, we know that it is useless. You do not have to keep saying so."

"Agh!" she exclaimed and was immediately hushed by the pesky librarian woman that kept stopping by to check on them. She brought her voice down to an agitated whisper. "I’m telling you, there’s something we’re missing! We’ve read everything from decoding to linguistic
interpretations and this is just…crap. Absolute crap.”

Loki nodded in agreement, flipping once more through the pages of scrambled text his mother had given them. “It makes no sense to me, Darcy. Why would my mother give us a book she said held dangerous knowledge if it is just mindless drivel?”

She tapped her chin pensively, eyes skirting over the text. “I don’t know. What confuses me isn’t the change of languages so much as the positions of the words.” She ran her fingers along the page to prove a point. “You see? This phrase, though completely illegible, is supposed to be read up and down, and is written lengthwise. Whereas, on the next page everything is written from right to left on an angle.”

Loki cocked his head at the book to get a better view of the words. Sure enough, the direction of the phrasing was as she said. He sighed, pushing up the sleeves of his sweater. “Yes. But what does it mean? We have tried to make out the text several times and there is no sense to it.”

Darcy ran her fingers under a string of words, reading them aloud in the allspeak. “That literally makes no sense. Some of those words don’t even exist in their respective language’s vocabulary.”

Loki ran a hand over his face, as if he could wipe himself free of this blockade in their research. “So let’s think about what we do know,” he said, exhaling slowly. “We have a list of every language used in the book.”

“Right.” Darcy pulled out a slip of paper covered in purple ink. “That is all we have.” Loki fell back into his chair. “We do not know anything else. The book has no author, nor maker or publisher. It has no legible content and no pictures. Brilliant.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, staring down at the book with the nastiest mix of disillusionment and verging obsession.

Finally, Darcy let her head fall onto the table. “I wish I could give up, but this book is driving me crazy. It’s all I can think about.” She trailed off. “Well…no. I think about food a lot more. Speaking of food, I have five bucks. Do you want vending machine fruit snacks?”

Loki nodded in exhaustion. “I would love vending machine fruit snacks.”

Darcy came back a few minutes later with five bags of fruit snacks. They each got two and they saved the last for Jörmungandr who would be very disappointed if they didn’t share.

Just as they were starting to get back on track from their short food break, a voice called from behind them. “Darcy?”

She turned, a large smile splitting her face. “Grace!”

The librarian hushed her from somewhere nearby. “I mean,” she said at a much softer tone, “Grace, hi.”

The girl, Loki assumed her name was Grace, approached their table. “Hey girl, how’s it going?”

Darcy shrugged, “I’m doing a bit of research on Nordic cultures.”

Grace shook her head in mock disgust and Loki quirked a small grin. She was a nice looking girl with shoulder length braids and pretty dark skin. “Dude, it’s a Saturday. Why are you doing that…”
on a Saturday?”

Darcy crossed her arms, “Because that’s how you do things when you’re Darcy Lewis!”

The angry whispering voice of a librarian sounded through the shelves. “Well, if Darcy Lewis doesn’t tone it down, she’s going to have to do research another place!”

Immediately she covered her mouth with a hand and both Loki and Grace began stifling laughter. Darcy smirked at them, “You two suck. Oh yeah, Grace, this is my friend Loki. Loki, that’s Grace. I talk about her sometimes.”

Darcy had told him many stories about the time she spent at soccer with her friend and he was genuinely happy to make the acquaintance of someone who made Darcy’s life at school bearable. He stood, thinking of the Midgardian custom to shake someone’s hand when they met. “Darcy has told me only the best.”

Grace was taller than Darcy though she still had to look up at him and she did so with wide eyes. She took his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Yeah…she’d better have.”

Darcy snorted. “You’re ridiculous,” she said jokingly. “So what are you doing here?”

The girl took a seat in Darcy’s chair, crossing her legs. “Well, Ms. Bates wants that stupid essay turned in by Monday and I still haven’t read the book for it yet.”

Loki remembered the book. Darcy had complained very loudly over her teachers making it necessary to the curriculum that they read a book as a class. She read the book in one night and then outright refused to do any of the work for it.

“Ah, yeah I’m not doing that,” Darcy sighed, looking back down at the table.

Grace flipped through the heavy reference materials Darcy had been reading. “I don’t understand you, Darce. You spend your Saturday in the damn library learning all this shit but you won’t write an essay.”

Loki was at first taken back by Grace’s language. But, he remembered that swearing was different on Midgard. Darcy had explained this to him over the summer after she had let the “’a’ word” slip out.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Darcy dismissed, pacing in front of the table as Loki sat back down in his chair.

Grace peered over their notes. “Is this in German? My dad spoke German.”


Grace continued looking around their table until she came to the book. Loki and Darcy shared an apprehensive glare when she began turning the pages in confusion. “What even is this?”

“Uh…Loki…”

“It was my mother’s,” Loki filled in smoothly. “She gave it to me. It is but a book of scribbles, I think.”

Grace flipped a few more pages. “Wow…that’s pretty cool. So, is it like a giant puzzle?”

Loki’s head snapped up and Darcy’s gaze met his in an instant.
A puzzle?

A puzzle.

It made perfect sense. It was all a puzzle.

Darcy immediately made grabby-hands for the book and flicked through the pages like a mad woman, excitement burning in her eyes. “Oh my god. Grace, you’re so right. It is exactly like a giant puzzle.”

Loki stood up as well, peering over her shoulder to traces the directional text with his fingertips. Each page was like a puzzle piece. All of them together would fit to make...well...something. They would have to find out.

“Grace, you’re a genius,” Darcy breathed, completely astounded. “I love you.”

Grace rolled her eyes, “Okay Lewis. I love you too, weirdo. I’m going to go work on that essay now.”

She waited a few seconds for them to say something, and Loki looked up at her in thanks. “I hope it goes well, Grace.”

“Thanks Loki,” she said sincerely, giving Darcy the stink eye. “Some people are just considerate and respond when people tell them goodbye.”

“And those people are suckers,” Darcy muttered, whipping out a piece of paper and taking rapid notes with an orange marker.

Loki smirked, bending over the table and pushing his sleeves up again in order to help her organize the pages by both visual and language pattern. It was a very long process.

Later that night…

Darcy’s hair was a mess and Loki had yet to change out of his Midgardian clothes. Papers littered the floor, all filled with notes on riddles. A plate of half eaten pizza rolls sat on Darcy’s bed where Fenrir and Jörmungandr slept.

Darcy picked one up and poked it into Loki’s mouth while he ran his finger along the patterns in the book. “I think we need to take out the pages,” he declared at last, dropping the book onto Darcy’s cluttered desk.

“I was thinking the same thing,” she agreed, moving to stand behind him. “Do you think they fit together? I think...if we put them together, they’ll make an image? I guess? Maybe.”

Loki nodded. “Yes. Only it’s going to be a very large image. These pages are 7 by 16 inches and there are six hundred and two individual pages. Not to mention there’s a backside to each page which means our puzzle is either three dimensional or it is double sided.”

“Double sided,” Darcy confirmed, brushing through the pages. “Can you detect any magic on it? I can’t feel anything, so if there is, it isn’t powerful.”

“No,” he shook his head, turning the book over to get a better view of the cover. “There is nothing. Faint traces here,” he pointed to the spine. “But it is very faint. So, I assume that the last person to have this book used magic to cast off the cover.”
He pushed up his sleeves in preparation as Darcy put her hands over his. “Are you sure you wanna use magic? Don’t you have to go back to the palace?”

He cast a wary glance to Darcy’s side-table clock. “Darcy, it is two-thirty in the morning. I’ll go home later today.”

Smiling tiredly, she released his hands as he magicked off the cover, leaving the stack of thick pages before them. She sighed, “Okay. If we’re going to do this we need a bigger space. My room isn’t wide enough to hold an image that big.”

“Yes, you’re quite right…” he trailed off thoughtfully. “We could go to Asgard? Even if we just stay in the field by the portal we will have more space.”

“Alright,” she nodded, picking up the stack of pages while Loki collected their notes. Together they slipped under the bed, arriving in the cave that seemed just a little smaller than it used to.

They pulled themselves out into the clearing where Darcy dropped the pages and Loki conjured a ball of light so they could see their work in the cool night.

Loki cast a spell so the papers would hover in the air in the position that they placed them in. Slowly, a wall of inked parchment began to form as they added more and more pieces to the puzzle. Darcy stood on one side of the papers and Loki stood on the other so they could arrange the pieces to their intended positions. It was tedious work.

The lines of text, curving and swirling in every which way were near impossible to fit together. And having it double sided? They would be up all night.

Darcy sighed, shifting a piece of paper from the place he had put it in. “It would be better if we knew what it was a puzzle of.”

“Obviously,” he said grumpily, moving the page back. “I would use magic to piece it together, only I do not have the slightest idea what I am supposed to be making. There are not even the least magical traces.”

Rubbing a hand over her face, Darcy began pacing. “Alright! Let’s think…there has to be an easier way to do this.”

Loki stared at the papers, tapping his chin. “I don’t know, Darcy. Perhaps the words have some meaning to them after all.”

“I thought the words were pointless?”

“No words are ever pointless.” Loki muttered, scanning the sheets before him, searching for some kind of pattern. “Give me the list of languages used.”

She handed him the paper and he read it over, running his index finger under the words. “The only Midgardian language used is an early form of Germanic tongue. Darcy, perhaps it is not the meaning of the words, but rather their location.”

Quickly, she hurried to his side, reading over the list. “Maybe…But all of it is ancient. That’s really old Asgardian, that’s Dark Elven…I don’t even know if that one is a language,” she said, pointing to odd block letters. “I have no idea what that is.”

Loki touched the page, brows knotting in confusion. “I know what language it is. I cannot read it.”
“Why?” Darcy asked. “I thought…what happened to the Allspeak?”

Loki shook his head. “The Allspeak encompasses languages inside of Yggdrasil. Many of these languages…they are not from the Nine Realms.”

Darcy gaped. “Woah woah woah man, back up. There’s stuff outside of Yggdrasil? Whaaat?”

“Of course,” he said, finding her confusion quite odd. “Darcy, come now. You really did not even suspect it?”

She rubbed her temples. “We never…I never read anything…”

“Very little is known. It is why I cannot speak the language. But I can recognize this one.” He said, pointing again to the block letters.

“What is it?”

“Celestian.”

“Explain,” she commanded, crossing her arms and resuming her pacing while he talked.

“The celestials were an ancient race that existed long before the Aesir or even the Dark Elves. They are legends to most, mere fables to others, and history to some. Anything we read about the infinity stones is because the Celestials were notorious for using them,” he explained. “Of course, we don’t know much at all about them. We, that is, you and I, only suspect that the Tesseract is an infinity stone.”

Darcy scrubbed her face again and she pushed up her glasses. “Ugh, okay. How many people know about all the stuff we do?”

Loki ran a hand through his untidy hair. “I do not know. I’m assuming my mother knows some of it, though how much, I cannot say. As for the rest of the Nine Realms…only very few would have an inkling as to what this is. We are on our own for this one.”

Her eyes widened in amazement. “Holy crap, you’re right. I never thought about that. We’re verging on a discovery that no one has ever discovered…except…you know, maybe the horrible person that wrote this book and didn’t put their name on it.”

“Anyways,” Loki brought them back on topic, gesturing to the languages. “This is Celestial, this is Midgardian, and this is Dark Elven.”

Darcy pointed to a few squiggly lines that marked the pages. “What about those.”

“I think…no…no, that would be…” he trailed off, trying to trace the form, “…odd.”

“Loki, spit it out.”

He sighed, “I think we may need to break into Odin’s study before I make an assumption about that one.”

Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose, her face scrunched up in thought. “So, you think these languages are indicators?”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed, “I think it is. You see, there are six infinity stones, or gems whatever you prefer to call them but that is all we know. They could be any powerful relic.”
“Yeah, I know. I read the book,” she sassed. “Mind, power, soul, time, space and reality. But really, that’s all it said. That’s the most any book has ever said; is that there are six stones and at one point all of them were in Yggdrasil.”

Loki groaned. “Yes. But, I am telling you that this puzzle may enlighten us as to where they are.”

Darcy’s head snapped up. “You mean like a map.”

They shared a knowing look and Darcy hurriedly returned to her side of the papers. “Organize them by language. One side of each sheet should have exclusively languages from Yggdrasil. The other side will have all the languages we can’t read, if I’m remembering correctly.”

Loki shuffled through the papers, magicking them to stay in place. “You’re right.”

“I’m totally always right,” she teased, beginning to shift the sheets around more rapidly. “You take the Nine realms. I’ll take the others.”

It was a vicious, hand trembling struggle. Parchment flew, fingers were cut on whipping pages, but neither could care for more than a second as two images began coming into place. The night wore on until the sky began to lighten and the damp grass began to dry.

Loki could sense they were almost done. His knees were weak and his eyes stung from being open so long. His fingertips were raw and he felt like Jörmungandr had eaten his brain and then regurgitated it for Fenrir to chew. He was on the verge of collapse when Darcy picked up the last piece to their puzzle and slid it into the single empty space of their map.

“Oh my god.” Darcy breathed, stepping back to examine their fine work.

Loki stared in awe, at a loss for words.

He and Darcy joked about being clever or about having the likeness to geniuses. But, at the moment, he felt as though their jests were a reality.

The book of nonsense and gibberish they had been poring over before now stood before them in a familiar shape. Words that had been so awkwardly placed now created a depiction of The World Tree.

The words themselves were still very confusing, but they worked to create the roots, and the trunk and the leaves and the branches in a wordy representation of the Nine Realms.

Darcy cleared her throat. “Loki, I think you should look at mine.”

Cautiously, Loki strode around the wall of paper, to Darcy’s side of the wall and gasped when he saw her end result.

“Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“What day are you free?”

“I think this Friday,” she murmured, still staring at the map before them. “It’s Halloween.”

He nodded, eyes wide. “How did you feel about trespassing again?”

A glint of mischief shone in her eyes and Loki could not help but suspect he was the cause.
Hello beautiful humans!
So, you may have noticed that I'm doing...things...with this story. I've added the Map as an Original Object (Is that even a thing?) I was a bit dubious of using it at first and I struggled over this chapter for a long while before I decided that it was within the best interest of my story to add it in. This map is, to be honest, really big. Loki and Darcy are really clever geniuses to have put it together so quickly. They're impressive.

Also, more about Asgardian politics because apparently I write a lot about that. I am trying my damnedest to show the involvement of Loki and Thor in the Asgardian Political setting. I kind of really want to stress the importance of their roles in the government. In the movie, Thor's coronation is a big-god-dammed-deal. It's huge. A new king is coming into power and I just really want to build up the weight of that. What would it mean for the different provinces? What are everyone's opinions going to be? Blah blah blah.

As for Thor...I'm trying to write him as a decent character. Even in the first movie, he was a brat, but he wasn't unlikable per-say. He cares about Asgard, but he also cares about glory and such. He's a teenage boy at this point and he's got the weight of a Prince's duties on his shoulders. Not to mention his little brother is a genius who, in all outward appearance, is unaffected by politics. Everything comes naturally to Loki and Thor is representing the majority of the population that stares dumbly at political texts and reaches for the closest distraction after a few minutes. (aka Mjolnir)

Thank you everyone for your kudos, comments and bookmarks as they are greatly appreciated. All of you are exceptionally fabulous human-beings. All who read this fic, please know, that I'm using this as an outlet for my Loki feels, which I happen to have a lot of. And the fact that you read this means that you either sympathize with my Loki feels, or you have yet to fall down this fandom rabbit hole.
Frank in the Study

Chapter Summary

Darcy speaks languages. Loki understands. Frank and Fenrir are lovey. Frigga is still boss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What do you mean you’re not going!?”

Darcy sighed, pushing her way through the halls with Grace at her side, slowly making her way to her locker. “I’m not going! That’s what I meant!”

Grace groaned in protest, leaning up against the wall beside Darcy’s locker while her friend worked the combination. “Dude, it’s Halloween. My Mom says I can only go trick-or-treating one more year! And this is it! What could possibly be more important than free candy!?”

Bitterly, Darcy removed her Spanish workbook from her locker. Not only was it a Friday, but it was ‘the’ Friday. The day her and Loki were going to break into Odin’s study. And where was she? At school. Going to Spanish class. “I told you, Grace. I’m busy!”

“You’re always busy,” Grace grumbled. “You’re always with your boyfriend!”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Loki’s not my boyfriend. He’s my friend who is a boy.”

“You turned down freaking Nick Benedict! Why would you do that unless you had a better option?!” Grace reasoned as they shuffled off to the Spanish classroom where Darcy plopped down in her chair moodily.

“He was a bad kisser. He licked my mouth and I only like him as a friend,” Darcy pointed out for the fifty-thousandth time since she had told Nick at soccer practice that she didn’t want to be his girlfriend. Ever since he’d hardly spoken to her.

Grace looked like she wanted to say more, but her words were cut short by their Spanish teacher beginning class.

Darcy was having major problems with school.

She knew more than everyone around her. She wasn’t a genius, but she wasn’t learning any new material either. Her school life would have been insufferable if not for Grace.

Darcy figured, that if she tried hard enough, her teachers and parents would allow her to advance another grade or leave public education in exchange for online courses where she could be more productive in her learning.

However, this idea did not appeal to Darcy. She didn’t want to exchange her boring school life for another equally boring school life. If she had it her way, she would just go live on Asgard and be Loki’s royal advisor or something. That would be productive. She would actually be a part of
something important. Doing something. Helping people. Sorting out Inter-Realm war crisis was infinitely more productive than sitting in a classroom writing verb congregations.

“Darcy, sit up please,” Sra. Garcia chided and Darcy did so grumpily.

She’d only been in class ten minutes and they already had to write boring stories in Spanish about what they were doing for Halloween. She thoughtfully decided to let her head flop back onto her desk and attempt sleep again. Just two more hours and the day was over. Then, she and Loki could get down to important things like trespassing in Odin’s study.

Maybe this time, she would just stay in Asgard.

“Darcy! Why don’t you tell us what you’ll be doing for The day of the Dead? Tell your classmates your plans for tonight in the future tense please.” Sra. Garcia requested in an overly polite tone to the half-snoring girl.

Darcy yawned, sitting up and staring at the blank notebook paper before her. “Uh…I think I’m going to just sleep. My Mom is going to pass out candy and my brother has a Halloween party to go to. So, I’m probably going to sit in my room.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, a trail of drool smearing onto her wrist. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

Sra. Garcia and the entirety of her Introductory Spanish class was staring at her with gaping expressions.

It took Darcy a second to realize what was wrong.

Spanish.

She was fluent in Spanish.

Speaking every language known in Yggdrasil was more of a bother than anyone would know, especially when you don’t pay attention to when someone starts using a different language. Even reading was difficult sometimes.

The other day, her dad asked her to help him set up a new bookshelf for her bedroom because her floor had reached the point where her piles of books were a serious trip hazard. When she took out the instructions to start helping him assemble the pieces, she accidentally read the Japanese bit and then proceeded to explain it to her father in kind.


The class continued to stare and Darcy sighed heavily. It was going to be a very long two hours.

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Loki sat on Darcy’s bed, staring intently at Jörmungandr and Fenrir as they played on the floor.

He knew his friends well enough to know that something wasn’t right.

Neither Jörmungandr nor Fenrir had ever lacked personality. But somehow, something was different and they had been acting strangely.

It was a well known fact around the palace that the serpent enjoyed exploring and making new friends. Lately, he had been travelling more often. Though he always remained at Loki’s side when
he wasn’t preoccupied with meetings, the prince detected something very different about his scaly friend.

Fenrir, Darcy had told him the other day, was also behaving peculiarly. Apparently her dog was eating more and often times she would find him wandering outside her house when she got home from school, even though all the doors had been locked.

The two animals stopped their wrestling game to intently stare at the other, nose to nose.

Gently, as not to disturb their contest, Loki reached out with his magic to search Jörmungandr for any magical oddities.

Sure enough, there was a spark of energy that just nipped at Loki’s magic as he investigated. He gasped, withdrawing his magic.

He had suspected that Jörmungandr was no longer just a snake. But he had not been given reason to believe that the Infinite Serpent had somehow managed to come by such powerful magic. It was apparent that he had not been born with it, as Loki remembered testing him several times for any abnormal tendencies.

No, whatever this energy was, Jörmungandr did not simply come by it naturally. He would have obtained it from somewhere. In fact, it was very similar to the type of heightened magical aptitude seen in mortals after eating one of Idunn’s…

“Jörmungandr? Fenrir?” Loki questioned in near-teasing accusation. “What have you been up to as of late?”

The snake’s response was a very dog-like chortle as he and Fenrir quit their shenanigans to lick Loki’s face.

“Your affections will get you nowhere. So where have you been? Hm? Is Darcy in on it?” he asked again, not truly expecting an answer.

Jörmungandr made a sound halfway between a hiss and a bark at Darcy’s name and whined a little. Loki smiled at this. He understood the snake’s sentiment of missing their friend. Loki found himself generally despising Asgard without Darcy. Lord Erlend was making his life miserable at council meetings. Odin’s return had at least guaranteed that the constant battering of his and Thor’s titles were subdued to the occasional heated retort.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Erlend’s main priority was to get armies on Vanaheim. Surprisingly enough, Odin was not rejecting all of his ideas. As a matter of fact, the Allfather had hardly spoken since awaking from the Odinsleep. Loki admired his patience and tried to mimic it exactly. After the entire summer of listening to Erlend’s complaints and whining speeches, he found it all too easy to sit by and listen to everything being said. He spoke only when necessary and took notes on what he felt was important.

Recent developments in their tedious Internal Affairs meetings led Loki to believe there was a slight possibility of having delegates sent over to Vanaheim for scout missions. Loki deeply detested this idea. Sending scouts over would be more of a threat than anything.

The ceaseless ineptitude of the council members was continuing to grind at Loki’s nerves.

Any plans to infiltrate their desired territory in Vanaheim would result in failure. At the moment, that particular tribe was warring with another civilization of Vanir. At any instant, the leadership of Vanaheim could change and the alliances between the Nine Realms could alter. The last thing
Asgard needed was to push the Vanir away at a time so near to potential war.

Not to mention the Light Elves were still indecisive. Loki believed that soon, Asgardian representatives would need to be sent over in order to persuade them into a treaty.

Jörmungandr licked his nose once more, bringing his prince friend back into the present moment.

Loki offered him a small smile, “It is 3:20 now. Darcy will be home in five minutes.”

Another nose lick.

Loki tapped his fingers on the table pensively, his mind wandering back to Jörmungandr and Fenrir’s abilities. How did they come by them? An apple would be the obvious answer, but how? Could they do magic? Could they use the portals?

Sighing, Loki stood, letting Jörmungandr wrap himself a couple times around his waist. He had slowed in his growth as of late and Loki wondered if he was to stop growing soon. However, with heightened magical abilities, he truly did not know the extent of what Jörmungandr could do.

For the moment, Loki did not see that the magic was causing his friends any harm. But, if it did in the future, he would rectify the situation immediately.

Loki rolled his shoulders, feeling more relaxed in Darcy’s room in his tunic and pants than he felt in any other place. Perhaps it was the feeling that he was closer to Darcy. She made everything in his life more interesting, but she also gave him a certain security. He did not have to worry about acting like a Prince around her. He could tease and jeer. He could hug her without any other reason but the desire to be closer to her.

Of course, in certain situations, he did act like a prince around Darcy, but only because she deserved it.

Darcy deserved the whole Nine Realms.

At ease, Loki searched Darcy’s newly installed bookshelves that now housed the entirety of their collection. There were five shelves in total and they took up an entire wall. Darcy’s desk had been moved to sit next to the window, though her bed stayed against the far wall of the room.

Finally, he came across the last shelf in the left corner of the room. He pulled on the book titled, ‘Hammer Etiquette’ to reveal a magical hiding space he created for Darcy to keep their more secretive things. Originally, Darcy’s main space for concealing things was to shove them behind her books. Loki gave her this new magical cubby as a birthday present. He invented the spell specifically for her. The space would expand to hold whatever she needed, whether it be a book or a herd of bilgesnipe.

Inside of it now was only the map of Yggdrasil and the Galaxy beyond.

He took it out, admiring the work of it once more. After they had the papers completely together, Loki had spelled them into place and shrunk the map to they could lay it out on Darcy’s bed and read it with magnifying glasses. Well, Darcy needed a magnifying glass; Loki did not as he was Asgardian.

Settling down on her bed, he began to look over the map once more for some kind of pattern. The problem was that language was too fluid. Words change meanings and sentences break structures more often than they make them. What he hoped to find in the Allfather’s study was a translator of sorts. Something that would allow him and Darcy to comprehend the unknown text and learn of its
Downstairs, he heard the front door open and quick footsteps hurry through the house. Fenrir’s ears perked up and Jörmungandr rushed to the door just in time for Darcy to hurry in. Her mother shouted up the stairs, “Darcy! You can’t spend your life in your room! Grace really wants you to go trick-or-treating!”

She sighed, happily cuddling Jörmungandr while bitterly yelling down at her Mother. “Mom! I’m too old to go trick-or-treating! I have homework to do!”

Loki nearly snorted at her lie. Darcy never did her homework. Darcy’s mom was silent for a moment and Darcy waited anxiously for her reply. “Alright! Fine. But if I get another call from the school saying that you’re failing due to missing assignments—!?”

“Thanks Mom!” Darcy yelled, closing her door with a huge grin plastered on her face.

Eagerly, she hurried over to her bed and plopped down between Loki and Fenrir while Jörmungandr settled on her lap. Her head settled on his shoulder and her hair tickled his cheek. Loki took her hand without hesitation and they were silent for a long moment, enjoying each other’s presence they had missed in the past week.

“Loki?”

“Yes Darcy?”

She turned to snuggle her face against his shirt sleeve. “Can we just spend the weekend on Asgard?”

Loki could not contain the excitement that bubbled inside him at that thought. How many times had he imagined staying up all night in Asgard’s archives with Darcy at his side? Or in his room, studying the night away? “Of course. You will be a most honored guest.”

“Awesome,” she breathed, sitting up so she could reach for her magnifying glass that she kept on her bedside table. “When do we leave?”

Loki habitually smoothed back his hair, “I suggest we wait an hour at least. We will search through my father’s study after he has taken to his chambers for the evening.”

Yawning tiredly, Darcy read over what she could of the map. “Okay. Sounds good.”

Loki frowned at his friend in concern. Typically she was more excited than this. “Are you feeling alright Darcy?”

She shrugged. Setting down her magnifying glass and pushing settling the map onto the floor. “I’m just really exhausted. I got sent to the principal’s office today.”

Loki situated himself so that he was sitting behind her and quickly conjured her hair brush. “Again?”

She nodded as he began to brush out her hair, relaxing the knots with smooth, even strokes. “Yeah. My teachers are all mad at me because I don’t do my homework. But then they had me do a whole bunch of tests and they think I’m smart now.”

He finished tying her braid and huffed. “Darcy, you are one of the smartest people I know. And I know myself. That is saying quite a bit.”
She shoved his shoulder lightly. “Okay, I am smart. But they want me to write essays and take tests. I don’t want to be that kind of smart. I don’t like doing those things.”

Loki motioned for her to continue, engrossed in her words. Darcy rarely spoke on her feelings towards school, other than her outward hatred for it. He had yet to hear entirely why.

She made a face, tapping her chin in thought. “Okay, think about it like this: On Asgard, I’m Lady Darcy of Nornheim. My friend is Prince Loki of Asgard. I can use all of my brainpower to help Asgard. I can help Asgard not go to war or stop people from getting killed. I can win in board games to help my friend and stuff like that. I can do things to help people. Or in my room when we’re looking for the Tesseract. I’m working to get somewhere.” She turned to face him, her eyes sharp with the kind of clever intensity he believed to be immortal even without the help of an apple.

“I can’t do that at school. I learn things for grades and I study math so that I can pass into the next math class. Homework is practice that I don’t need. I don’t analyze books in my English class like I would read an Asgardian Politician’s past writings. Do you know what I mean?” She finished, her eyebrows coming together a little bit.

Loki pursed his lips, sympathizing with his friend. As a prince, he was taught and trained for many years on the strict duties of being royalty. But because he and Thor were so close in age, he was also taught how to be a king.

Under normal circumstances, the eldest son would be given the throne when he came of age. However, Frigga had birthed Loki so soon after Thor that they were hardly two Midgardian years apart. Two years, being no more than a blink of an eye for most Aesir, did not seem like enough of a time difference to simply hand Thor the throne without at least considering Loki.

Odin always told them that they were both born to be kings. Loki could only guess that is what he meant.

Training to be King was difficult work. It was long, hard, and for many years, he was given tasks similar to those of Darcy’s homework. But he did it. Not because he wanted to, but because he wanted to help Asgard. If he was going to be King, he wanted to do right by Asgard.

Perhaps Darcy lacked the motivation.

“I understand you Darcy, and I wonder, do you still wish to be president one day?” he asked curiously.

She nodded slowly. “Yeah. I think so.”

He sat up a little taller, “Then think of your education not as some pointless work graded on effort, but rather as a stepping stone. You must learn all that you can now to be a better president later. If you express your sentiments to your instructors, perhaps they will allow you to pursue more political studies.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Huh, you know, I should. I bet Grace would think I was crazy, but whatever. I’ll talk to them on Monday. We don’t start learning government systems till next year, but I’ve already read most of the curriculum and stuff, so I should be good! Oh man, I can see me now! Darcy Lewis. Ms. President.”

Loki listened as she rambled on, her enthusiasm back on track and he found himself, in that moment, extremely proud to be her friend. He was glad to have motivated her. Though a part of
him was weary. A great a president he was sure Darcy would be, he could not help but think she belonged on Asgard, outsmarting Aesir and contending with rulers from all over the Nine Realms. He could not imagine Darcy Lewis confined to leading only a small portion of a single realm.

Yawning again, Darcy tossed her body down into her nest of covers, her legs thrown across Loki’s lap. “I’m taking a nap. Why am I so tired? I’m tired all the time. And soccer isn’t helping. My legs are sore.”

Loki chuckled, beginning to massage her calf muscles. “You are in the midst of Midgardian puberty, Darcy; it is only natural that you are tired. Yet, why you must sleep now rather than early in the morning I cannot understand.”

Darcy laughed and sighed in relief as he worked out knots in her legs. “I’m not tired in the morning. I’m tired now.” Her knee jerked a bit when he reached the ticklish arch of her foot. “Where did you learn massage therapy?”

He raised a brow that she couldn’t see because her face was buried in a pillow. “I studied with Eir and spent time learning about the different muscle groups.” He didn’t add that he had done extra research on humans just so he would know how to fix Darcy if she was ever broken.

Darcy hummed in a teasing sort of way, but other than that, they did not talk again. It was afternoon and a sleepy time of day. Jörmungandr and Fenrir nuzzled their way onto the bed, both curling up near Darcy. Even Loki was feeling the effects of their drowsiness and after Darcy had fallen asleep and he had successfully worked the cramps from her legs, he lay down beside his friend and fell into the best sleep he’d had all week.

He didn’t even notice Darcy’s wiggling.

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“Oh, lemme break down the plan one more time,” Darcy whispered as they dismounted Hel much later that evening.

Loki nearly groaned. She had ‘broken down’ the plan close to fifty times on their ride to the palace.

She continued despite his reluctance. “Step one, infiltrate the study. You zap us in there with magic so we don’t have to sneak past all the guards.”

Loki led her into the palace to find mostly empty halls, as their usual wandering inhabitants had already gone to bed.

“Step two,” she whispered as they rounded a corner, “You cast that spell that hides us from Heimdall. You can only make it last for five minutes, so we have to make this trip count.”

Loki held up and arm to stop her from hurrying straight into the path of an oncoming guard.

After they passed Darcy whispered even quieter. “Step three, don’t touch anything that isn’t a book because the Allfather’s study could be dangerous.”

They continued down the hall at a normal pace until they were near enough to the study that teleporting them there would have minimal affect on Loki’s magic.

“Step four,” Darcy sniggered, before taking his hand, “Use the code names.”
Loki gave her a disapproving look. “Darcy, we are not using those names.”

She pretended not to hear him, looking off into the distance distractedly. “I’m sorry, did you say something HornPrince?”

“Darcy—“

“SwordQueen didn’t hear you, HornPrince,” she chided, looking around airily.

Loki fought the temptation to roll his eyes and sighed shortly. “I much prefer the eagle codenames.”

“Say something HornPrince?” she asked lightly.

Finally, Loki conceded, giving his friend a withering look. “Ready, SwordQueen.”

“Excellent,” she smiled, taking his arms and pressing her lips tightly together in preparation for them teleporting to Odin’s study.

They arrived and Loki cast the spell the moment their bodies materialized on the floor. Under normal circumstances, he would not go through such drastic measures as to shield him and Darcy from Heimdall. The Gatekeeper would not even acknowledge their presence if he did not cast his gaze upon them. But Loki thought it best to take the extra precaution just in case Heimdall did look for him somewhere.

He supposed it was a risk to his title as a prince to venture to Midgard and pose a mortal girl in the position of an Asgardian High Born. But that was a risk he was willing to take. If caught, he would make it certain that Darcy suffered none of the consequences.

He and Darcy nodded once to each other as they set out in different directions.

The Allfather’s study was a thing of wonder. Most people never saw past his general meeting room. That is where many of his more private conversations took place. But, waiting beyond Odin’s desk, accentuated by golden pillars and vaulted ceilings painted with magic was a wealth of untouched knowledge that only the daring could hope to understand. Loki rarely traveled away from the space a few paces before Odin’s desk, for when he came to visit the Allfather, that was his place.

But now, for the next five minutes, his father’s mysterious temple, filled with books of untold contents, was all his.

He ran to the nearest cluster of shelves, searching them for any book that might remotely help with his and Darcy’s search for the tesseract. Using a few magical incantations, he copied each of the texts and magicked them into his chambers so that the Allfather would not notice any missing books from his collections. He moved quickly and quietly, unsure of where Darcy had wandered off to.

They only had a few minutes left.

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Darcy was in awe.

She loved the library on Asgard and had decided long ago that it was one of her favorite places.
But Odin’s study?

There was something so unique about it. The walls were marked with the history of Asgard and the floors gleamed with the promise of royal knowledge. The Allfather’s Study was truly a chamber meant for kings.

Well, kings and curious twelve year old mortals.

Gleefully, Darcy skipped down one of the more narrow aisles between bookshelves and searched the spines for helpful material. She was just about to pick a book off the shelf when she heard whispering.

Tiptoeing to the end of the aisle, Darcy peeked around the shelves to catch sight of her eavesdropping victims. She could not see them down that side of the hall, so she suspected they were behind the shelf in front of her. Ever so carefully, Darcy removed one of the books at her eye level to peer at the whispering users of the Allfather’s personal library.

She gasped when she recognized them.

“My Lord, why would we meet in such a place? You have directed that I stay in the capital and promote Nornheim’s quarrel with Vanaheim.” Lord Erlend’s pompous whispers were urgent.

Lord Bjarte’s response was unhurried, yet anxious. “And that was unwise on my part. Your views are too old-fashioned for the Capital, Erlend. I should have realized your restraint was not solid enough to participate in their decision making. Prince Loki has been making a fool out of you and the entire province the moment you opened your mouth in the palace. Not to mention you let that damn girl mouth off to you.”

Darcy’s heart beat a little louder at the mention of her and Loki’s doings. The short burst of pride was met with fear. What was Lord Bjarte doing in the capital? He never came to the capital. He was terrified of—

“Queen Frigga,” Lord Bjarte continued with a sickly sweet whisper, “has requested my presence in the capital. I would be a fool to deny summons from her.”

“Yes,” Erlend agreed, “But why here? Why the Allfather’s study? Surely if we were caught—“

Bjarte scoffed. “It is a game. A game of wit. A game of cleverness. Tell me Erlend, if I were to have a box and inside the box I told you was the most deadly poison in all the Nine Realms. What would you do?”

Erlend’s tone seemed confused as he responded slowly. “I would…open the box?”

“Fair enough.” Bjarte continued, “Now, if I told you that if you were to even set eyes on this poison, it’s magical properties would kill you, would you still open the box?”

“N-no.” Erlend stuttered, unsure of what to say. Darcy wondered if it was an appropriate response to roll her eyes.

Bjarte’s smile was evident in the sharp change in his voice. “There you have it. You see, the poison could not truly kill me lest I give it the opportunity. You see, this entire Capital would not dare intrude upon the Allfather’s precious study. Call it respect. Call it fear. Call it what you like. I know that I do not have it. For if no one enters this room but the Allfather, who has now taken to his chambers for the night, who have I to fear?”
Darcy believed this was a fair point, despite the fact that Heimdall was always watching. But maybe he didn’t look inside the Allfather’s study. Maybe Loki didn’t have to use the spell after all. She pressed herself closer to the shelf, eager to hear why on Asgard Queen Frigga would invite Lord Bjarte to the Allfather’s study late at night.

Just as the whispers started up again, a flash of gold met Darcy’s eye and she whipped around to come face to face with none other than the Queen herself.

Darcy’s heart raced as she searched her mind for an excuse as to why she was in the Allfather’s private rooms and spying on covert political meetings. Frigga only gave her a little grin, a smirk of sorts, and pressed her index finger to her lips before turning the corner to address her guests.

Her heart calmed only a fraction as her mind sped forward. Had Frigga meant for her to stay? Obviously she had. What could this conversation possibly be about that she would want Darcy to hear it? Where was Loki? What--?

“Lord Bjarte, you have arrived.” Her voice was forward and loud compared to their discreet whispers. “And Lord Erlend, you’re here as well. How quaint.”

Both Lords cleared their throats and Darcy watched them shuffle into hasty bows. She caught a glimpse of Lord Bjarte’s beard, finding it as weird as ever it was. “Your Majesty.”

Lord Erlend made to speak first, as Darcy had decided was his way, but Bjarte interrupted him. “Queen Frigga, why have you called me to the Capital?”

She didn’t answer immediately; instead settling into a cozy looking chair nestled between a short side-table and a stack of old tomes. “In time, Lord Bjarte, you will know the answer to that question. But first, I would like you to relieve your man-servant of his position as a participant in the Asgardian council. Send him back to Nornheim where his words are heard and his opinions are better suited.”

Lord Bjarte didn’t miss a beat and Darcy respected his sharpness. “You ask me to control a man who is no more than myself? To release one of Nornheim’s voices in the Capital?”

“Do not play coy with me, Bjarte. The power you have over him is marked upon his life. Send him back to Nornheim, or I shall give him reason to fight your control.” Her glare intensified. “And I know how much you hate losing your things.”

The was a silent exchange between Erlend and Bjarte before the former turned on his heel and exited down the aisle, reuniting with the world outside of Odin’s study. Frigga waited until Bjarte’s heavy breathing quieted to say anything more.

“How fares Nornheim?”

“Well enough.” The Lord’s honeyed words dripped with apparent hatred and Darcy could sense it was fueled by one thing. Fear. She never doubted Lord Bjarte’s fear of Frigga. But never could she have imagined that this would be the effects of his dread. “Now, I must ask again, my Queen, why I am here?”

Frigga sighed, folding her hands in front of her like Loki sometimes did when he was thinking. Though, unlike her experiences with Loki, Darcy did not sense any apprehension in the Queen’s features. “You have been guiding Nornheim in the direction of war with Vanaheim for nearly two years.”

“You are here to dissuade me then?” Lord Bjarte taunted haughtily, giving a short bark of a laugh.
“You send your son to Nornheim to talk us out of battle. He brings in that little pest to humiliate Nornheim—“

“Oh please,” Frigga interrupted. “Nornheim did not need the assistance of Lady Darcy to be humiliated. You were doing a fine job yourself.”

Darcy covered her mouth with her hand to suppress a wave of giggles.

“It is no matter,” Bjarte quipped, ignoring her latest remark. “I will not be discouraged.”

“You are so dramatic.” Frigga picked up a book from beside her, running her fingers over the pages approvingly. “I have not called you here simply to tell you what you cannot do. The Allfather has not consented, nor has he ever consented to your desires for war. Henceforth, war will not happen simply because you wish it.

“I have summoned you here, Lord Bjarte, to tell you that there will be war with Vanaheim.”

The silence was stunning and Darcy’s brain nearly shattered into a million tiny pieces.

A war?

A war.

What?

There couldn’t be a war. She and Loki had fought to avoid a war. What was Frigga doing?

Before Darcy could drop Queen Frigga as her role model, the conversation started back up again.

“I…beg your pardon.”

“War, Lord Bjarte,” Queen Frigga repeated bitterly. “Oh, believe me, I do not want it. I do not wish for it to happen, yet it must, and it will. But not for some time. I expect four years from now, Vanaheim will request our assistance in vanquishing their most unwelcome tribe. They have recently taken over that little spot of land you Norns craved so dearly and they threaten Vanaheim’s alliance with Alfheim. When that civilization progresses and becomes an issue to the rest of the Vanir, they will ask our assistance.”

Lord Bjarte seemed to find his wits somewhere along the way and spoke in his thick, fluid tone. “And why, Queen Frigga, would Vanaheim call on help from Asgard? Surely their armies are sufficient enough to kill off the unwanted in their midst.”

“You claim to be the cleverest man in Nornheim yet you cannot even think past pride.” Frigga said pitifully and a chill ran through Darcy’s spine. Her words were kind, understanding, and disapproving. Her lack of judgment was more fearful than if she had wrath. In that moment, Darcy shared Lord Bjarte’s fear. It was not because Frigga was cruel or harsh, but rather that she was knowledgeable.

It was plain in the way that she walked and talked that she knew more than anyone and that she was wise enough to run the Nine Realms without anyone at her side. Yet, her discretion kept her power secret. It opened up a world of possibilities that were ever so worthy of being feared.

“Pride.” The Allmother smiled. “The Vanir see past it better than Asgardians. No doubt they could handle the tribes, but strategically, having Asgard fight for them would open up the opportunity for a treaty stronger than our current one and they will avoid any form of civil war.”
Lord Bjarte considered her words for a long moment. “And why are you telling me this? Why here? Why now and not four years from now when Nornheim is of need?”

“The Norns are slow,” the Queen answered sullenly. “They need to be prepared to fight on Vanir soil. They need to be educated on what kind of weapons they will be fighting against and what kind of traps would be in the trees. Asgardians are not used to that territory. They will need to be equipped for it.

“I also expect that you will withdraw your extra delegates from the council meetings and cease your incessant bombarding of the Capital.” She finished with the kind of finality only a mother could give.

“That still does not answer why you have chosen the Allfather’s study for our little get together,” Lord Bjarte questioned suspiciously.

Frigga smiled knowingly, rising from her chair and walking to the end of the aisle. “Well, as they say, you never know who could be listening.”

The Lord stood stunned for a moment longer before Frigga beckoned him forwards. “Come, Lord Bjarte. I will see you to a longship. I would hate to have you stay in the Capital when you detest it so strongly. Perhaps on the way you can tell me of your Hnefatafl game with Lady Darcy….”

Darcy waited until they had left before sinking to her knees by the shelf and thoroughly thinking through the events that had just occurred.

War was starting. Frigga had purposefully gone out of her way to make sure that Darcy knew of Lord Bjarte’s involvement.

Darcy racked her brain, trying to think of why she should be so significant as to have the Queen of Asgard hold a personal meeting in a place where she was bound to hear it.

The answer to her question clicked within seconds and Darcy, still caught up in her shock, ran to go find Loki. If they were going to war in four years, he would probably want to know about it.

“HornPrince to SwordQueen, we have a situation!”

Chapter End Notes

Haha! I've updated! Sorry this one took a while. I got caught up in life. Ugh. Life. So, a couple weeks ago, I was sent some super fabulous fan art via tumblr.
Drawn by the seven year old daughter of azhriaznellie, this image depicts Darcy, Loki, Frank and Fenrir. Loki is wearing his helmet, Frank has a hot dog, Darcy is thinking about an axe, and Fenrir is in the corner by the blue moon ice cream. I love this so much. Looking at it makes me happy. I think I stared at it for a good five days.

Alright, notes on this chapter...
Something I'm really trying to emphasize as of late is the amount of stuff Darcy has to give up to be a part of Asgardian life. She's very smart, very clever, and her best friend has one of the highest positions of power in the Nine Realms. Darcy is a pretty influential kid. What she's beginning to realize is how her potential to help the Nine Realms has grown. It makes it difficult for her to sit through class and everything because she has already been through so much.
Also, she has to give up a lot of family and friend stuff. Her relationships with Grace or even her parents are not nearly as strong as her relationship with Loki. If anything were to happen to him...
I think that's all I really have to say on this chapter.
Thank you for reading!
Frank's Friends Make Weird Decisions

Chapter Summary

Sif is strong. Sigyn likes that. Darcy's cousin. Fenrir is magical. Loki realizes...things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sigyn sat by a lone window in the ladies’ chambers, a book sitting open in her lap. She had read it before and usually she could count on this particular story to pull her out of boredom for a while. But the Asgardian winter was upon them. Snow drifted around outside, white flurries breezing through the gardens.

Snowy winters on Asgard were not uncommon, though they did not happen every year. Sigyn rather liked them; though many of the other ladies complained about the cold, she always wanted to go play in it.

Sighing, she gently closed her book, setting it off to the side before making up her mind to go visit the training grounds to find Sif.

Lately, they had been spending much time together.

Sigyn smiled at the thought of her friend as she stopped by her chambers to grab a fluffy pale blue cloak. Sif was truly amazing. She was tall, beautiful, intelligent, and strong.

Strong.

Sigyn was in utter awe at Sif’s strength, both physical and mental.

Ladies of the court spent so much of their time practicing to be dainty. Sigyn remembered many a lesson on what she must do to obtain a decent husband. She was taught that to attract royalty, she had to be delicate. But, the more time Sigyn spent with Loki and Thor, the less she believed her lessons had any value.

It occurred to Sigyn that both princes’ closest acquaintances were female. Loki had Darcy who contradicted just about every lesson Sigyn had ever taken. She fought with swords and challenged men. She talked too loud and laughed too merrily. But she was herself and she had yet to meet anyone who truly disliked Darcy. Even many of the ladies had come to have a begrudging affection for the girl over the past few months.

Then there was Thor. His dearest friend was Sif.

There was so much to say about her.

Sif wasn’t afraid to show how strong she was, nor was she overly proud. If she wanted something done, she did it. She would not wait around for a guard’s help or maids to assist her. Sif would spar with anyone who wanted to practice and didn’t let any judgment get in the way of her improvement. She did not act like the typical lady, but nor did she behave like a man. Sigyn valued that.
Because Sif did not want to be a man. She wanted to be a warrior. And she could do that as a woman.

Cloak fanning out behind her, Sigyn walked brightly to a small deck that overlooked the training grounds. There, fighting in the snow were the next warriors of the military. It went without saying that most of them were young, but none so much as Sif.

The black-haired girl was dressed in her armor and was rolling around in the frozen cold dirt with one of the men as they fought in weaponless combat. Sigyn’s heart stuttered in a strange kind of way as Sif caught her opponent’s head between her thighs and squeezed, rolling them so she had the upper hand. The man beneath her fought, but Sif held him down with her bare, dirt covered arms until his face was beet red and he was banging the earth with his fist.

The overseer of their training indicated for Sif to let go and she did, standing up and freeing the poor man’s neck. Sigyn almost laughed after he stumbled to his feet. He was at least two heads taller than Sif and was three times as bulky. Nevertheless, they were laughing together and he clapped Sif on the shoulder just as he would any of his other warriors in training.

Sigyn tentatively waved her hand to Sif as her instructor dismissed the group. Sif caught sight of her friend, her responding smile lighting the gray around them.

“Sigyn!” she called rushing over, belting on her sword on the way. “How fare the fine ladies of the court on this wintry day?” Sif asked in a teasing voice, dirt smudged on nearly every inch of her face.

“Miserably,” Sigyn answered in kind, a matching grin upon her lips in the presence of her friend. “They demand summer from the gods and seek courtship with exotic men from warm places.”

Sif hummed, “I think I’ll settle for a hot bath.”

“Shall I accompany you?” Sigyn asked, blinking snowflakes from her eye lashes.

“Please,” Sif replied, tossing back her black mane with a grin.

Together, the two friends made their way to the Ladies bathing chambers. Those in the military typically had their own public bathing space, but being that Sif was a woman, she was permitted to use the ladies’. Warriors who were honored by royalty and were part of Asgard’s elite forces and required to spend most of their time in the capital were given either housing in the city or chambers within the palace. Sigyn often wondered, when Sif became one of the elite, which option she would choose.

Would she stay in the palace as she had her entire life?

Or would she leave?

Sigyn imagined her life after she was married. She was forced to think about it nearly every day. The ladies teased her most unpleasantly about her impending courtship with Prince Loki.

She did not know if they would eventually marry. But, after some consideration, Sigyn decided that if she ever had to marry any man, she would want him to be Loki. He was kind, intelligent, and gentle. He was confident when he needed to be and far too curious for his own good. There was no doubt that Sigyn held a certain affection for the younger prince. He made an effort to please her that so few had ever attempted.

Many told her that she could have done better. That she could have sought courtship with Prince
Thor instead. But Sigyn did not even like to think about being wed to Thor. She was loyal to him only as her prince. Still, she granted him respect that came only through his relationship with Sif.

Thor supported Sif. Lately, he had been going out of his way to prove how strong a warrior she was. He was loyal to her and he treated her with the respect she deserved. Because of this, Sigyn did not detest Thor. He was arrogant at times, ignorant at others. But he was a good friend and Sigyn appreciated that.

The bathing chambers in the mid-afternoon were empty. The bathing pool was hot and scented oils stirred just on the surface of the steaming water. Sigyn helped Sif out of her armor and called forth a few hand maidens to have it cleaned and sent back to Sif’s chambers.

The black haired girl smirked at her friend once she was settled in the water. “Sigyn, if you continue to pamper me, I will go soft.”

“You are already soft,” she teased, poking her friend’s muscled arm before removing her clothing and sinking into the bath as well.

Sif offered a humorless laugh before wading through the pool to go stand beneath the waterfall, showering herself clean. Grime washed off her body, the black dirt trailed off her shoulders leaving tanned skin in its wake. Soap suds had seemingly just begun to melt over Sif’s belly when Sigyn caught herself staring.

She had seen Sif’s stomach only once before. It was about a month ago Darcy had come to Asgard. The eccentric friend of Loki’s was frequenting the palace a great deal more as of late and the three girls had been spending quite a bit of time together. Whenever Darcy came, Loki made sure that she was given her own private chambers that typically accommodated traveling lords and ladies.

The last time Darcy visited the capital, she, Sif, and Sigyn had spent the night in her rooms. They talked until late at night when Darcy and Sif began discussing strength building. Sigyn had nothing to include this conversation, but listened nonetheless as she found it quite interesting to listen to women talk about something as predominantly male as muscle growth.

Darcy had mentioned that she was weak but her muscles were bigger than they used to be and Sif told her of personal methods she used to strengthen herself. Sometime later, when their conversations became rather ridiculous and they were laughing so hard it hurt to breathe, Sif had lifted her shirt to show them her abdominal muscles.

Sigyn, on many occasions be it wrestling matches or a trip to the water gardens in high summer, had seen muscles on men. They were big, bulky, and made them look like they were pumped full of air. But they were something entirely different on Sif. Smooth lines skated upwards from the waist of her pants, framing the fine lines of muscle there.

Most women of Asgard, Sigyn had come to notice, were very narrow. Not bony, or sickly. Just verging on plain. At least, that is what Sigyn thought after she had seen Sif. Her entire frame was lithe, cut, overwhelming. Unlike a man, her muscle did not make her look hulking or unattractive. In fact, it added to her. It helped Sigyn to define Sif with the one word she’d never be able to apply to any other ever again.

Strong.

Sif was strong.

“Are you alright?” the older girl asked, stepping out of the waterfall and wading over to her friend.
“The only time silence has ever been so loud is after Darcy leaves a room.”

Sigyn laughed because it was true. Darcy could talk so much that, after she left, what was usually a normal, peaceful quiet seemed deafening. “I’m quite alright,” she assured, sitting down on the ledge of the pool, gesturing for Sif to stand in front of her.

“There is something on your mind, Lady Sigyn,” Sif insisted, turning her back to her friend so she could begin sectioning off her hair for a braid. “Tell me.”

Sigyn blushed a deep pink, positive that she was never going to tell Sif her exact thoughts. The mere idea was humiliating. She instead chose to divert the conversation, a trick she learned from Loki when he wished to avoid talking about himself. “For not being a lady, Sif, you do enjoy gossip.”

She shrugged as Sigyn went on with plaiting her hair. “Well, I do spend much of my spare time with you.” She tilted her head forwards to allow better access to the hair on the nape of her neck. “You are avoiding the question. Now I am truly curious.”

Sigyn sighed, deciding that she would settle for a small white lie. “I was considering something Loki told me earlier today. He claimed that he would be gone for a few days but he did not say where he would be going. I’m wondering what he could possibly be up to in this weather.”

Sif sighed in thought as Sigyn tied her braid. “Well, Lady Sigyn, I think you may be wondering for a very long time.”

***

It was Christmas on Midgard and Loki was riding Hel to the portal to Earth. He was strong enough in his magical capabilities that he no longer needed to ride Hel to get to the cave. Yet, he did so anyways in order to spend quality time with his four-legged friend. On this day, Loki was particularly excited.

He and Darcy had been spending copious amounts of time studying two things. Politics and the map.

Darcy had started doing research on what she wanted to learn from political studies on Midgard to better ask her teachers at school for learning materials. She’d come across an area of study called “political science” which focused on the analysis of political behaviors and activities. Darcy was in love with the concept of it and had been using many of the new skills she was learning from textbooks in deciphering their current situation.

She had told him of her encounter in the library with Lord Bjarte and his mother and, quite honestly, Loki was unsurprised.

His and Darcy’s theory was that because Darcy had beaten Lord Bjarte in Hnefatafl, she had some control over him. It wasn’t a lot because of the spell’s restrictions, but if Darcy had been born with the ability to wield magic as Loki did, the magical connection between her and Lord Bjarte would grant her a great deal more control over his person. It made Loki that much more happy that Darcy was as clever as she was, for if she had lost the game, it would have been the Weird-Bearded lord with control of her rather than the other way around.

In four years time, when a war was bound to take place on Vanaheim, Lord Bjarte would be a general for Nornheim’s armies. Loki, personally, did not think that Lord Bjarte particularly liked warring and fighting. He did, however, believe that Lord Bjarte favored great power.
If he and Darcy went to Vanaheim as well, then they could be prepared for any outrage that Lord Bjarte had planned.

Of course, that was just their theory.

There was still so much that could be deciphered from the chunk of information his mother had granted them.

Though, for the time being, the majority of their studies had been on the map.

In the library, Loki had come across only a few books to aid them in their research. One of them was a language book that proved he had been correct in his identification of the squiggly lettered language. It was Titanian.

Darcy’s side of the map displayed Yggdrasil as a very small part of an encompassing galaxy. After fitting the pages together, more languages became evident. Many of them he had yet to classify. It was all very confusing.

Yet, after two long months of incessantly poring over the map, Darcy found a pattern.

The day she made the discovery, Loki had been tired. The night prior he hadn’t been able to sleep. He found himself restless at night without Darcy. Usually, the smell of her hair or the sounds of her even breaths were enough to lull him to sleep before her wiggling started up. It was a vicious cycle. He couldn’t sleep well with her and he couldn’t sleep at all without her.

That night, he was just starting to nod off on top of Darcy’s covers while watching her stare intently at the map. It had been pinned up on the wall with the section of Yggdrasil facing them. For the time being, they had chosen to ignore the other side. Loki did not yet have the resources to allow them safe travel outside of Yggdrasil. Not to mention, he had never been there before.

There was a good chance that things outside of the Nine Realms could kill Darcy in a bare instant. And there was no possible way he was taking that chance. Not even for the Tesseract.

Darcy had stared at the map for a very long time. Her unblinking blue eyes traced every word on the sheet when at long last she snapped her fingers, claiming that she found something.

Loki had hurried over as she excitedly explained her findings.

Each section of the map was marked with the native language that region used when the map was created. The section that created Midgard was made up of a bunch of tiny languages, many of which didn’t seem to exist anymore; the entirety of Asgard was made up of the Allspeak and so on.

Darcy had found a small anomaly in all of this.

Within the writing that mapped out the different realms, there were small snippets of phrases from different parts of the universe. The phrases themselves still did not make much sense, but the origin of language had deemed itself significant.

They suspected that the location of these small instances of different languages could mean one of two things:

Firstly, that the creator of the map had stayed up far too late writing in language after language after language and had made a mistake.

Or secondly, that the placements of the misfit languages were intentional and they could
potentially be implications as to where the infinity stones are.

They had decided to go with the second prediction for the time being.

It was a far-fetched idea to suspect Infinity Stones. The purpose of the map was undefined. The only thing that Queen Frigga had made clear when giving it to Darcy was that it would assist her in her studies on Midgardian and Asgardian interactions.

Still, Loki and Darcy had reason to believe that the stones were a part of the map. The inclusion of the known galaxy as well as Yggdrasil implied that whatever the purpose of the map was, it stretched beyond the Nine Realms.

Universally speaking, Yggdrasil was isolated in some ways from the rest of the universe. The existence of the rest of the Galaxy was rarely talked about and any reason to converse with those outside the Nine Realms had been cut off long ago. This is why it confused Loki to find chunks of Celestial phrases etched into the lines of text that made up Asgard.

The only form of contact Asgard had ever been known to have with the outside worlds concerned the Infinity Stones. Those times had so long since passed, that many believed they were legend.

And that is where Loki and Darcy came in.

The morning after Darcy had discovered the pattern Loki took the map back to Asgard and began mentally picking apart the text word by word until he was able to pinpoint a few places where the language changed. It was easiest to do in places like Asgard, where everyone communicated in All-speak, or Svartalfheim where the language had consistent until the fall of the dark elves. Now, there was simply no one left there to change old lingual traditions.

Midgard was by far the hardest scenario.

As far as language was concerned, Midgard was extremely diverse. Modern day Midgardians spoke a plethora of different languages, even within the same country. Deciphering any distinct change in text made Loki’s head hurt, especially when so many early languages were reminiscent of All-speak. Telling the difference between the two was easily one of the most frustrating tasks Loki had ever attempted to accomplish. Given that he did not believe any Infinity Stones to be residing on Midgard, he made the decision to let it alone.

After much persistence and more late nights, Loki came to the conclusion he was at now.

He had found a very plainly located change in language centered at the heart of Jotunheim. Darcy had seen it a while ago and had been asking non-stop if they could go. Loki did not have the slightest inkling as to why she would want to go to Jotunheim. But she did.

So, as a Christmas present, he had planned a trip to go there. As long has he kept on a spell that kept them concealed from any Frost Giants they might see, what was the worst that could happen?

Of course, they would be breaking Asgardian law to do so. Though, Loki found it was debatable that he was doing anything wrong. They were simply going to Jotunheim in search of a certain artifact. There was no harm in looking, was there?

No. Of course not. He and Darcy would be fine. He would protect her against any Frost Giants should they be discovered and he had what Darcy would call a ‘back-up plan’ for their escape just in case he suffered a similar reaction that he had on Muspelheim.

Telling Darcy that they were going to Jotunheim was his surprise gift to her. He planned to tell her
as soon as he made it to her bedroom.

Hel trotted merrily through the forest, hardly making any noise as they made their way through the field. As soon as the portal was in sight, Loki dismounted Hel, Jörmungandr close on his heels. He stroked her mane fondly. “I may need you soon Hel. Darcy and I will be going to Jotunheim. Will you be able to make it there?”

The horse bowed her head in a manner that quite deliberately answered him with a ‘yes’. The bony side of her muzzle bumped Loki’s head in a goodbye cuddle that he reciprocated happily. Loki watched Hel dart away into the forest and disappear behind a cloak of leaves before making his way to the passage to Midgard.

By the time he was pulling himself out from under Darcy’s bed, he could hardly stop himself from rambling off in a very Darcy-like style his current musings. “…Darcy! I have spoken with my mother and she has granted me permission to be gone from the palace until the start of the Midgardian New Year. We—“

Loki stopped talking when he turned to face Darcy’s bed only to find, not Darcy, but rather a small boy with brown hair and glasses far too big for his small face. He seemed young. His eyebrows came together in curiosity. “Who are you?”

Taken back, Loki’s first reaction was not to magically cast the boy into unconsciousness, but rather answer his question. “I am Loki. Who are you?”

The boy nodded, scooting to the edge of Darcy’s bed to hold out his right hand. Loki recognized the familiar Midgardian-American custom of shaking someone’s hand upon meeting them. “My name’s Peter. Peter Parker.”

Loki took Peter’s hand and shook it. “It is good to meet you, Peter Parker.”

Peter smiled with a sort of genuine happiness that Loki found he identified with. It was similar to Darcy’s smiles, freely given and borne from her own amusement. Peter’s smile was almost shy, as if pleased at the prospect that someone might like to know him. Loki was familiar with that smile. The hesitancy of it…

Immediately, Loki felt some sort of personal connection to the young Peter Parker. He deserved to be befriended. “Loki?”

“Yes, Peter Parker?”

“Are you friends with Darcy?” he asked, a twinge of fear in his tone as Jörmungandr slinked down Loki’s shoulders onto Darcy’s purple pillow.

Loki nodded. “Indeed. She is my best friend.” He paused for a moment, waiting to make sure that Peter Parker was comfortable with Jörmungandr’s presence. He relaxed slightly upon receiving a nose-lick. “Are you also friends with Darcy?”

The boy shook his head. “No. Well…maybe. We’re cousins.” Cautiously, he smoothed a hand over Jörmungandr’s head and the snake let his tongue loll out in satisfaction. Loki nearly rolled his eyes at his scaled friend. One would think that he was neglected and starved of attention. “Do you think Darcy would be okay with me reading her books?”

Loki could not think of any objections Darcy would have to Peter reading her books. “I think she would encourage you to read her books. What is it that you find interest in?”
Peter Parker thought about that for a moment and Loki thought it was funny how he took off his glasses to fiddle with them while he considered the question. Comparatively, Darcy would have tapped her chin.

“Well,” said Peter Parker, “I like science fields. Biology, chemistry…physics is the most interesting though.”

There was some timidity in his voice that Loki was now determined to vanquish, for Darcy had not told Loki that there were other people around her age on Midgard that enjoyed the study of applied sciences. “I find interest in these very same things. What is the extent of your studies?”

***

About thirty minutes later, Darcy thundered into her room, cheeks red and snow clumping her hair into frozen strands around her face. Fenrir was at her side, melting snow flurries in his gray and white fur. Immediately after her door was promptly slammed shut, she collapsed to the ground, not even acknowledging the studious occupants of her bedroom.

Loki set aside the textbook he was using to explain the basic ideas of quantum physics to Peter Parker. Darcy had been interested in the subject over the summer and had insisted that they learn all about it. Loki was beginning to truly like Peter Parker. He was shier than Darcy, but overall they shared many favorable qualities.

Only, at that moment, Loki was more concerned for Darcy and he rushed to her side as she groaned into the carpet. Quickly, and with anxiety fresh in his chest, Loki stripped Darcy of her wet coat and socks, wishing, for the first time that evening that Peter Parker was not there so he would be able to magic warm clothes onto Darcy.

Instead, he leaned to her dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of thick socks and fit them onto her feet. “Darcy? Are you alright?”

She groaned again and spoke, her voice muffled by the carpet. “Loki, your dog is an idiot.”

Loki cast a wary glance at Fenrir who was now chasing his tail, the tip just touching his nose. After a few seconds, he stopped and sneezed enthusiastically. “He is an idiot. But he is our idiot. What has he done?”

She remained lying face down, possibly oblivious to the company of her cousin. “I think he got into some weird magic somewhere on Asgard. You know the cat who lives three doors down?”

“Snootie the Cat?”

“Yeah. Fen got it in his mind that he needed to go chase after her…” she sighed heavily. “He can run super fast. Not just faster than me. But, like, almost as fast as Hel.”

Loki’s eyes widened just slightly. “Interesting. So, you chased after him? That was not the wisest decision.”

Darcy shook her head solemnly against the floor. “No. I didn’t chase after him. I had to go get the poor cat down from the stupid tree and she clawed my hand and then I fell out of the tree.”

In an instant, Loki was magically searching her over, forgetting entirely about Peter Parker’s presence and the secret of magic. She had fallen from a tree? “Are you alright, Darcy? Can you move everything properly? Where is the injury the blasted cat gave you?”
She lifted her arm limply and Loki worked at removing her gloves and scarf, continuing his examination of her vitals. Golden light emanated from his hands as he found no permanent damage in her body. There was a significant amount of internal bruising on her ankle, he supposed from jumping out of a tree.

With almost no forethought, he cast a spell to heal her wounds. “Darcy, by Odin, you must be careful. There is only one Darcy Lewis in all the Nine Realms and I would mourn to have lost any part of her.”

Finally, Darcy sat up, inspecting her hand where three red scratches had previously pained her. “Loki, you’re such a mom.”

“And you are a mess. What is your point?” he quipped, rubbing her upper arms soothingly.

She groaned again, leaning into his chest and embracing him firmly. “Happy Christmas,” she grumbled into his neck, her chilly face soaking up the heat of his skin.

He laughed and rubbed her back, letting his heartbeat return to its normal rate and his nerves to settle. Stroking Darcy’s hair, he let lose a few charms to dry the brown locks and relieve them of their melting slush. Darcy sighed in relief when the cold on her head dissipated and she hugged him a little tighter.

Loki could not help but have his spirits lift at her affections. Often times, Loki worried that perhaps his desires for closeness with Darcy were too much. On Asgard, there was no such thing as a casual touch between those of the opposite sex. It was something that, upon developing his friendship with Darcy, he had not known that he needed.

In some ways, it was embarrassing. An onlooker might perceive his want for closeness as childish or needy. Loki sincerely doubted that Thor or Sif or any of those on Asgard felt as he did, and because of that, he kept these feelings to himself.

It was comforting to him to know that she was safe with him. If Darcy was sound and laughing in his arms, he could know for certain that she was not dead, or dying, or falling out of trees. She was with him and he was with her and that’s exactly how Loki wanted it to be.

Eventually, a small voice spoke from behind them. “Loki, how did you do that to Darcy’s hair? Is that a science-trick I can learn?”

Darcy’s head shot up from Loki’s shoulder, eyes focusing on her younger cousin. “Peter! You’re still here!” she looked between him and Loki. “And you met--?”

Peter Parker smiled, “Loki was teaching me about quantum physics. He said you might know some more about it too. Can I borrow one of your books? I know we don’t see each other that much, but I promise I’ll take good care of it. Uncle Ben just put a bookshelf in my room.”

Darcy’s wide blue eyes were lit up with a series of confused reactions. She shot a questioning glance at Loki, clearly asking why he had allowed himself to be seen by Peter Parker. “I guess?”

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Loki stood, offering her his hand. “Indeed it is, in a sense, a ‘science-trick’, Peter Parker. However, I do not think you would be able to learn it. Not now at least.”

Darcy accepted Loki’s hand, standing up to go sit by Peter Parker who now looked just a tiny bit disappointed. “Okay. Darcy? Do you have another book that explains this more? I don’t understand it all the way.”
For the rest of that afternoon, Darcy, Loki and Peter Parker spent their time in Darcy’s room, sharing knowledge, drinking hot chocolate and eating pizza rolls until someone called down the two Midgardians for dinner. Before they left, Darcy tugged on Peter’s shirt sleeve. “Hey Peter?”

“Yeah, Darcy?” he inquired, pushing up his glasses.

Darcy’s eyes flicked back and forth from Loki to her cousin. “Um, downstairs, can you not talk about Loki? He’s kind of…well…he’s my secret friend. No one knows about him but you and me.”

Peter Parker nodded, eyes wide and ready to make anyone happy. “Sure. I kinda thought that maybe no one knew about him because he was under your bed. I’m going to go wash my hands.”

On that note, Peter Parker exited the room, Fenrir on his heels. Darcy watched after him, her black rimmed glasses balanced precariously on the end of her nose. Loki touched her shoulder comforting. “What troubles you Darcy?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Peter’s my favorite cousin. I’m three years older than him, but he’s still really great.”

“Well, I am a little over two thousand years older than you, and you are bearable.” He teased, receiving a light punch on the shoulder in return for his jest.

“Hahaha, very funny,” Darcy laughed, pushing up her glasses at last. “I was just thinking that he reminds me of you a little bit.”

“How so?”

She tapped her chin, staring at him analytically with her lips puckered. “Hm, I don’t know. He’s just really nice. He’s got kind of a soft personality.”


She smiled, taking his hand in hers. “Maybe not, but when we first met, you looked like him. Or acted like him at least.”

“What did I act like?” Loki asked, fairly upset that she thought of him as soft. He was a Prince of Asgard! He had killed a man by filling his brain full of steel. He was a sorcerer and a political snake. He was not soft.

“Like you needed a friend,” Darcy told him quietly, giving his hand a gentle squeeze before hurrying down the stairs after her cousin.

Loki stood there for a long moment, thinking back to his days before he met Darcy.

He remembered his days as a young child sitting on his mother’s lap learning little bits of magic. After he had grown some and began to conduct his own studies, for many…many years he was alone every day. In the library he studied to the best of his abilities. Of course, he hadn’t known how lonely he was.

How could he? He had never experienced another life but his friendless existence. He was a devout learner. He had his future to look forward to. Loki thought back to his compliance. If anyone would have asked him to do something, he would have done it if it meant potential companionship. But so few had ever been eager to converse with him.
Thor was always much more popular. He was more outgoing and better at fighting. Loki had many ailments as a child; ailments that he could not remember much of. Thor told him that once they had spared with blades poisoned with a special brew concocted on Vanaheim. It was a training exercise. The poison was meant to be added encouragement not to let your opponent land a blow.

But Loki had never been quite as strong as Thor, and at that point, he had yet to truly define his style with a blade. The cut his brother gave him had taken forever to heal. The poison…

Loki remembered the poison. It had burned almost as hot as the air on Muspelheim. Not long after being hit, he lost consciousness and awoke a week later in Eir’s soul-forge with Thor at his side. Unlike most Aesir, Loki did not have a strong aversion to poisons from Vanaheim. The effects of that particular toxin had cast him into a state akin to hibernation.

After the humiliation of being proved lesser than Thor once more, Loki did not leave his room for nearly a year. He devoted time into learning everything he could to make up for his slights. It had taken pleading from Thor to pry him away from his books and back to interacting with people. Loki had not trusted most people at that time lest they be his parents or brother. People always talked about him.

But books…books didn’t talk.

For most of their childhood, before Thor started his adolescence, the brothers were fairly close. Thor defended Loki when others spoke ill of him and on rare occasions, or on particularly boring days, the two would find trouble around the palace. Usually, the trouble was aided by what little magic Loki had.

These adventures they had were far and in between their times apart. Thor had his friends and Loki had his studies.

Thinking back on it now, Loki had been so very much like Peter Parker. Small, bright, and entirely too eager to please.

At the peak of his childhood loneliness, right before his adolescence, he met Darcy Lewis.

She had asked him to be her friend.

It occurred to Loki how lucky he was to have stumbled onto that passage to Midgard. Without it, he would still be holed up in his library, unknowing of his own despair.

The rest of that night, Loki was fairly quiet.

Darcy and Peter Parker returned and Darcy brought him a slice of chocolate pie that he very nearly fell in love with. Unfortunately, he devoured it before any true feelings could be formed.

They sat in the floor of Darcy’s room, playing one of Darcy’s new thought engaging card games. Admittedly, they were quite fun. But most of the answers were trivial. Loki did not see the point in knowing what the name of every single capital city on Midgard. Darcy thought it was of some use though, for she knew most of them.

Peter Parker was, by the end of the night, given three books from Darcy’s collection. One for each of the three basic science fields: Chemistry, Biology, and Physics. He left Darcy’s room sometime around eleven to go to bed. His sleeping bag had been set up in Darius’ room.

Darcy put her game away, running downstairs to tell her family goodnight before changing into her pajamas and crawling into bed. Loki magicked on his preferred nightwear of simple black pants
and a shirt. Fenrir and Jörmungandr got comfortable at the foot of the bed and Loki smiled at how ridiculous their situation must look. Both he and Darcy had grown, he more so than her, and Jörmungandr had halted in growing lengthwise in favor of getting thicker. Loki decided that it was not that his snake had been indulging on too many Fire Giants, rather that his body was thick with muscle. It did make the serpent a great deal heavier.

Darcy yawned, taking off her glasses and burrowing herself between Loki’s arm and a pillow. “I like Christmas. I made you a present, but it’s on Asgard.”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “You made me a present? On Asgard?” he thought back to when she would have time to make him a present. If she was on Asgard, usually they were at council meetings or in the library. Unless she decided to go spend a night with Sif and Sigyn or practice sparing in the training fields.

“Mhm,” Darcy said tiredly, changing positions so her leg was thrown carelessly across his body and her head was nearly hanging off the bed. “Well, kinda. You’ll see.”

Loki tried to repress the excitement that bubbled in his chest at the promise of a gift from Darcy. Suddenly, he was reminded of his original purpose of visiting Darcy on Christmas. “I have something for you as well.”

She wiggled a bit more, sitting up to kneel at his side and press her palms to the center of his chest. Her blue eyes almost lit up the room for how brightly they shone. “Really? What is it! Loki, I can’t believe you waited till almost midnight to tell me! Christmas is almost over!”

Loki sat up, curious to see her reaction to his gift. “Well, I wasn’t sure how you would feel about it. You see, I cannot simply hand it over to you.”

Darcy was nearly bouncing now, her hands balled up in anticipation. “What is it?”

He smirked, “Are you sure that you wish to know? Or--?”

“Yes! Loki! Come on!” she demanded, the wide toothy grin on her face making every second of his procrastinated response worthwhile.

Slowly, he brought their faces closer together and spoke in a mere whisper. “I have safely found a way for us to visit Jotunheim. I—“

He didn’t get much else out after that. Darcy leapt so high with joy that she had fell off the bed and was now giggling in the floor. “Are you serious?!” she asked in a whisper after she was breathing properly again and threw herself back on the bed.

Loki nodded. “We leave when you are ready. There we will search for the Tesseract.”

Abruptly, Darcy was out of bed again and she paced the room, her oversized blue pajama pants swishing as she walked. “Peter leaves tomorrow for upstate New York. We...by Odin, I can’t believe this is happening!” she jumped up again, punching the air with her fist. “Alright, we’ll do all our planning tomorrow and leave the first thing the next day.”

She took a second to collect herself before settling down into bed. Loki raised his brow, “Are you sure laying down is wise? I fear your body may burst with all the energy it’s giving off.”

Darcy nudged him, squirming around and kicking the covers in hysteric. “You’re the one who gave me the awesome Christmas present.”
Loki laughed tiredly, finding peace next to the chaotically beautiful whirlwind beside him. And somewhere in the midst of her storm, he fell asleep, mentally preparing for whatever Jotunheim had to offer.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! I updated!

Alright, so a few notes on this chapter: I added Peter Parker in as Darcy's cousin. The idea of Darcy and Peter being friends was suggested to me by Sagoberattare (a really awesome person) and I kind of fell in love with the idea. Naturally, Peter probably won't ever know everything. But it made so much sense in my head for them to be related. Like, really. Imagine Peter is having science questions and he calls up Darcy and Loki sees who's calling and answers the phone. Okay, Q head canons. Sorry.

Also, I threw in some stuff about Loki's past. Like, before he met Darcy. It sort of explains but I have little faith in how well my writing depicts my thought process. So, really, Loki was a lonely child. He was thought of as 'sick' for a good part of his growing years and so he probs spent a lot of time with Frigga. But then, as he was supposed to get more independent, he just spent more time alone. He was lonely, but he didn't know what it was like not to be lonely. Like how you can't know the bad without ever having experienced the good.

Aaand I somehow always find reasons to throw in excessive cuddling. Loki really does just need a hug. He needs one all the time. I'm pretty sure all Asgardians need more hugs, but they're too damn stubborn and proud to ask each other for affection. So they, like, hit stuff with swords instead.

Okay okay okay, I'm done. Next up: Jotunheim.
*bum bum buuuum*

Seriously, you guys are fantastic and I love it when you share things with me. Tasertricks head canons, weird fandom dreams, opinions, babbling, really anything. I think it's awesome.
Frank Goes to Jotunheim

Chapter Summary

Thor finds some things. Heimdall pities. Frank eats some ice. Loki worries (big surprise). Darcy doesn't make a friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor stood in the snow on Asgard’s training grounds, utterly miserable.

How was it that Loki managed to just leave? Thor was old enough now that he could leave the palace when he desired. But he did not often find anything of interest beyond the walls.

Sure there were shops and people and culture, but Thor was not interested in those things.

He wanted adventure.

Loki seemed to be having all the adventures.

Thor tried entertaining himself with training. Sif had become his near constant opponent because she was the only one willing to fight for so long and without rest. Hogun would as well, but he tired easier as he was Vanir rather than Aesir.

However, this morning, Sif was with Sigyn.

Sigyn.

Thor didn’t know how he felt about Sigyn anymore. Of course she was beautiful and she was one day to be one of the most respected ladies in the palace. She had chosen to court Loki rather than any other for her first courtship. Thor figured that, because of her courtship with Loki, she would favor magic and study.

Then she and Sif began spending more time together and Thor wondered what was so charming about Sigyn that he had missed before. He attempted to speak with her a few times, and she was polite, but distantly so. Thor decided that he did not particularly like Sigyn as clearly she did not particularly like him.

Even so, he did appreciate Sigyn. She was a friend of Sif’s and Sif was very dear to him.

Cold and bored, Thor walked into the palace. Perhaps he would go get Fandrall and they could go find an adventure somewhere. Or perhaps Loki was back from his travels.

Remembering that Fandrall had planned to take Lady Amora on a walk through the gardens on that particular morn, Thor chose to go find Loki. Decidedly, Thor headed for Loki’s quarters rather than the library as he had not seen his brother at breakfast. Loki tended to separate himself from the court on occasion. Oftentimes he preferred to be alone.

This bothered Thor. He would not say it aloud, but he was often quite concerned for his brother.
For the longest time, Loki had secluded himself. Alas, Thor would admit now that he had been a part of his brother’s seclusion. He had always wanted to prove himself better than Loki.

It made no sense to him now, how he had put Loki down in order to raise himself. He was already the higher prince, already the eldest. He slighted Loki when he had no need to.

Guilt plucked at Thor’s throat but he swallowed it down.

He needn’t worry about that now. Loki knew he meant no harm, did he not?

Besides, he had Darcy.

The Lady Darcy.

Thor had fought her one time, and much to Loki’s displeasure, taught her more about offensive positioning. She was quick to catch on, though quite weak. She was not Sif when it came to strength. Still, she fought well enough. And she was good company to keep. Always there with a spark of wit and charm to keep conversation flowing.

The only thing that confused Thor about Darcy was Loki’s constant worry for her. He tried to hide it, but he did not do a very good job which Thor found rather strange. Loki could be very secretive when he put his mind to it. But it was different with Darcy. He quite plainly fussied over her like a mother to her newborn child. Of course, the same could be said for Darcy about Loki. She was always pulling food out from somewhere to poke in his mouth or fixing his hair.

And for such close friends, they argued constantly.

If their arguments had not been borne from affection, one might think they hated each other.

Thor came up to Loki’s chamber door and knocked. After a few seconds of no response, he threw open the door to the first room of Loki’s chambers.

Because they were royalty, their quarters were quite large. Royal chambers were made up of three separate rooms. First was a space used to accommodate guests. Of course it was strangely improper for royalty to keep company in their chambers, so this area was a moot point. This room, instead, was filled with things that captured the interest of the occupant.

Loki’s room, for example, was filled with books. The walls were lined with shelves and the arched golden walls, draped in green, made the books radiate a kind of wholesome glow. Thor preferred to keep swords and training materials in this part of his quarters and the hangings on his walls were red and silver rather than green and gold.

Thor figured that Loki would be in bed since it was still rather early to be up when there were no meetings to attend. He moved into the next chamber which was large and was far more spacious due to the lack of books. The balcony doors were thrown open and snow fluttered into the room. No fireplace was lit and it was quite chilly.

Thor moved to shut the doors before turning to his brother’s bed.

But it was made and the sheets were cold. Loki had not gone to bed last night.

Unexpected anger surged through Thor. Why was it that Loki could just leave? No one knew where he went. No one knew why. Yet, somehow, Thor, the eldest prince, could not get away with such behaviour.
Thor bitterly stomped back into Loki’s study chamber, prepared to go back to the training fields and spar until Mjolnir was hot in his hands in the freezing snow, when something on Loki’s desk caught his eye.

It was a white feather.

White feathers were not all that strange, Thor supposed. But no bird on Asgard grew such long white plumes. There were large birds, but none were so pure in color.

Carefully, Thor picked up the feather, turning it over between his fingertips. The end was crusted with emerald green ink and the papers below it were coated in Loki’s elegant script.

Thor shifted the papers to read the top sheet which lay partially covered by a map of Asgard and a map of Jotunheim. Curiously, Thor read his brother’s notes. One thing Thor noticed is that they were not entirely written in the All-language. Some of his explanations were written in what he believed was a Midgardian tongue.

More than that, there were strange bits of letters and numbers pieced together into odd lines of text. Thor supposed they were magic of sorts since he did not understand half of what it meant.

He shuffled through more of the papers until he came across a sheet dated the day prior. Eyebrows knit, Thor read the text in fascination:

_After much study, I have concluded that, while it is still unsafe to travel to Jotunheim, I can cast the necessary precautions to keep Darcy warm and the both of us from the eyes of the Frost Giants._

Thor gasped, setting down the paper. Quickly, he flipped through the sheets till he found more conclusive statements.

_Based on the multiple war documents we have found, the Heart of Jotunheim is centered about half of a Midgardian mile beneath Laufey’s throne room and the chamber that once held The Cask of Ancient Winters. A tunnel, created by the Allfather during the Great War, still remains and will grant Darcy and I access to this underground location. The map indicates…._

Thor stopped reading, uninterested in Loki’s odd fascination with past events and the magic-like things that he seemed to talk of next. Hastily, he looked to the map of Jotunheim, a small green dot marked a location about three röst from Laufey’s Palace.

Loki was going to Jotunheim. Loki was breaking Asgardian law to go to Jotunheim. Loki, the quiet son, the careful one, the smart one, was disobeying the word of the Allfather to go prance around Jotunheim with a Lady.

A slow smile spread across the blonde prince’s face.

“And he did not invite me,” Thor muttered, tossing aside the papers. “No matter. I am sure my brother could use some company.”

Hurriedly, he stormed from the room, cloak trailing behind him as he rushed to the stables. Heimdall must have let them pass to Jotunheim. And if Heimdall let Loki through, he was obligated to do so for Thor as well.

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Heimdall stared down at the young prince before him.
“No.”

Prince Thor gestured to Yggdrasil with his hammer. “Heimdall, you claim not to have let Loki pass. He has indeed gone to Jotunheim and it is vital that you open the Bifrost for me to go as well!”

Heimdall settled both his hands on the pummel of his sword contemplatively.

Obviously, Prince Thor had discovered something about his brother’s constant disappearances and was none too happy about it. To some extent, Heimdall pitied Prince Thor. Compared to Loki, he lived a fairly boring existence. He did not exercise his independence as Loki did and Heimdall figured that it was because Thor had never been quite as alone as Loki.

The younger, darker prince had spent a fair amount of his childhood learning to get along by himself while Thor was more social and outgoing. While Loki’s loneliness had led to near dependency on the mortal, Darcy Lewis, and self proclaimed liberty from any of Asgard’s laws, Thor’s extroversion had led to the reliance on others’ attentions to assure him of his own actions.

He would go through any adventure if it meant having a story that would glorify him more greatly. He would fight stronger than anyone in training if it meant that he could get a louder applause.

Eventually, Thor had grown bored with this attention. Heimdall had seen. Heimdall had watched as Thor became more conceited. He believed himself above others because he had a lifetime of people telling him so. He was arrogant now, that much was easy to see. He was arrogant and bored and, unbeknownst to Loki, in competition with his brother.

No matter this, the truth still held that Loki had the means to entertain himself. Being that both Loki and Thor were princes of Asgard, it was entirely possible for them to dedicate their time to the bettering of Asgard. Heimdall believed that, as much as the Allfather wished this to be so, they were still boys and boys needed adventure.

“Heimdall, allow me to pass. Do you not see that Loki is on Jotunheim?” Thor demanded once more.

Heimdall’s gaze flicked, not to Jotunheim, but to Midgard where Darcy Lewis was laying across Loki’s back, pestering him about his late sleeping habits while the black-haired prince grumbled into his pillow.

Repressing a sigh, Heimdall made his decision.

“You are not dressed warmly enough.”

Thor blinked in shock. “What?”

“You are not dressed warmly enough,” Heimdall repeated casually. It was true. Thor would freeze in the attire he currently wore. Though he wore a cloak, his arms were completely bare. “Retrieve your mail and when you have returned, I will allow you passage.”

Thor looked sheepish for a moment before nodding vigorously. “Of course. Right…I shall….I shall go.” He turned towards his horse, then stopped as if some strange thought had struck him. Immediately, he faced the Gatekeeper again. “And Heimdall, you are not to tell the Allfather of this. He cannot know. I am only going to save Loki.”

Heimdall fought the overwhelming urge to raise a skeptical eyebrow. Truly, he was supposed to alert the Allfather of a great many things. But he was his own person. He was Asgard’s watchful
eye, yet he had a mind of his own. He did not make completely unbiased decisions.

Besides, as dutiful as he was to his King, it was a well known fact that his Queen was the better person to deal with some things.

Because of this, Heimdall settled for a nod in the Prince’s direction. He would not tell the Allfather of this occurrence. The Allmother was another case entirely. Without hesitation, he called for a guard to go alert Queen Frigga of her son’s developments.

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“I can’t breathe.”

“You are breathing now. Do not be so dramatic.”

Darcy huffed, attempting to cross her arms through the several layers of fur Loki had magicked onto her body. “Are you, Loki Odinson, seriously telling me not to be dramatic?”

Loki smirked as Darcy finally shed one of her many coats. “It is cold on Jotunheim and if you freeze to death, I will be unhappy.”

“Then cast a Warming Spell or something.” she complained, waving her arms in attempt to free some of the fabric from around her body. “I’m immobile!”

Relenting, Loki magicked away some of her snow wear, leaving her in thick black leather pants and her leather armor that was sorely reminiscent of his own but with more purple. Strapped to her waist were her two swords that held her initials. She kept the one with the ‘D’ in her left hand and the ‘L’ in her right.

Loki knew the swords were initials to her name, Darcy Lewis. But, he guiltily liked to think of the ‘L’ representing his own name. She was right handed and he was deeply pleased at the idea that, in some metaphorical sense, he was her immediate form of protection. There was something so significant about that sword being on her right.

Loki could be, to use the Midgardian phrase, her ‘right-hand man’. He could be right beside her. He could do right by her. On her right.

Darcy wrung out her limbs, getting comfortable with carrying around the heavy weight of armor. It meant nothing to him as an Aesir, but the armor could do a lot to weigh down a Midgardian. She bounced on the balls of her feet for a second. “Alright, I’m limbered up now.”

“Is that what that was? I thought you just had to use the toilet…again,” he teased and Darcy stuck her tongue out at him, reaching into her pocket to retrieve the map.

“Maybe a little bit of both. But that’s not important right now.” She pointed to the spot in Jotunheim they were supposed to be heading. “Let’s run over this one more time before we have to go stand outside in the cold.”

Loki paced the room, remembering years’ of history lessons on the history of Asgard.

“Odin Allfather won the Great War against the Frost Giants after he drove them back into Jotunheim. His final victory was at the center of Jotunheim, after he disarmed Laufey.” Loki ran through the basis of Asgard’s triumph with little enthusiasm. “The palace was so heavily barricaded that the only way to make it in was from below. To do this, Odin used the heat from Gungnir to create an underground cavern that went all the way from the east side of Jotunheim to
the center. From there, he broke into Laufey’s throne room, ‘razing the long standing ice pillars of Ymir till none stood but Odin himself.’”

Loki quoted one of the many accounts of Laufey’s defeat, getting on his knees to re-lace Darcy’s boots. She needed proper ankle support if they were going to be walking through the rough, icy terrain of Jotunheim.

Darcy played with his hair as he did so, smoothing back the different strands individually while she confirmed their plan. “The tunnel that Odin ran under Jotunheim was only big enough for an Aesir to travel through and he placed the entrance in a cave in the far east.” She curled one of Loki’s black locks around her finger, straightening the wavy strand and then letting it fall back against his head before continuing.

“The tunnel leads just below Laufey’s throne room, but somewhere just under it, is the heart of Jotunheim where, on the map, misfit words are written.” Darcy took her hands from Loki’s hair as he finished with her laces and began accommodating his clothing for the low temperatures to come.

“If we can get near the end of the tunnel, we might be able to blow a hole in the wall or something to make a path to get down into the heart of Jotunheim,” she finished smartly.

Loki held up a finger. “But,” he reminded warningly, “we will do so discreetly. The heart of Jotunheim is a very sacred place for the Jotuns. It’s the coldest place on their realm and is said to be the safest place on Jotunheim. During the war, anything considered invaluable would have been kept there.”

Darcy nodded in agreement, hopping off her bed. “Right. So we’re going to be extra careful and not mess with the nice Jotunn’s hiding spot. We’re just going to look at it to see if there’s a Tesseract there.”

“Nice Jotunns,’” Loki scoffed, fitting gloves on Darcy’s hands. “You’ve gone mad.”

Darcy gave him a withering look as they still disagreed on the Frost Giant’s monstrous mannerisms. Scowl in place, Darcy stowed the map in her pocket once more. “And if something crazy happens where one of us almost dies, we have to keep powering through it and not do anything to draw Heimdall’s attention to us because you’re breaking laws by going to Jotunheim.”

“Yes, Darcy, you know the procedure if anything is to happen to me again—“

She waved him off. “I got it covered. Drag your butt to the nearest portal and we skedaddle.”

He held up his pinky finger. “Pinky promise?”

“Pinky promise,” she assured him, linking their fingers.

On that note, they slipped under Darcy’s bed and teleported to Asgard. The usually grassy planes of Asgard’s fields were heavy laden with snow. But the air was clear and sharp, offering them crisp breaths on their short hike.

It fascinated Loki how very close to the capital all the portals to Jotunheim were. When the convergence happened, the two realms would have fair access to one another. Loki decided that was not necessarily a good thing. Perhaps sometime soon, he and Darcy could work on how to secure those weak points between realms.

For now, they walked through a part of the forest that was at a significantly low elevation. It was
cooler there, but Loki rather liked it. Most Aesir were not fond of the winter, but, admittedly, Loki liked it. Snow always felt strangely comforting on his skin.

Magically, he prodded the area around them, searching for the portal he knew was nearby. Darcy was being very attentive to his actions and he knew that she was attempting to feel what little she could.

Magic.

Loki very much wished that Darcy could use it. She understood it better than most Asgardians and she would have more use for it as well. The only problem was that she was mortal. Even if he did teach her how to use magic, she still would not have a substantial amount of energy to work with. He had not found a way to give her any sort of extra energy without causing her some sort of harm. Her mortality did not allow for her to accept his magic without damage being done to her central nervous system.

All of those problems could be remedied with the aid of one of Idunn’s apples. But he was no closer to finding her orchard than he was to finding a portal out of Yggdrasil.

If Darcy ever used magic as a mortal, it would be of her own power.

Suddenly, a tingling sensation hit his skin. It was strong and the temperature around them had dropped a great deal. Darcy sent him a knowing look, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Alright. Do you think this is it?”

“Yes,” he answered, continuing to feel the magical anomaly around them. “Take my hand, Darcy.”

She took hold of his outstretched hand, linking their fingers and calling to their animal friends. “Frank, Fenrir.”

They bounded to their sides, Jörmungandr trying to swallow an extremely large mouthful of snow. Loki turned to face Darcy, staring down into the blue depths of her eyes. “Remember our plan, Darcy.”

“You too,” she told him sternly, gripping his fingers a little tighter.

They shared one promising glance before Loki spiked the energy around them, opening the portal and sending them to the frozen plains of Jotunheim.

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Thor stared uncertainly at the icy terrain before him, not having an inkling as to where he was or where he should go to find his brother and Lady Darcy.

Perhaps he should have read more of Loki’s notes before commanding Heimdall to let him pass into Jotunheim.

Gripping Mjolnir a little tighter, Thor examined his surroundings. Sheer icy planes expanded seemingly forever around him, mounds of blown snow accumulated in cracking heaps, and the flurries beneath his boots were so thick and frozen that they crunched with his every step. Howling wind beat at his hair and Thor was suddenly very glad that Heimdall had told him to dress warmer.

He could not imagine this cold in only his cloak.

Thor’s thoughts flitted to Loki and his heart contracted ever so slightly. His brother was not nearly
as muscled as he was, surely he would freeze in these arctic temperatures. And the Lady Darcy? As strong willed as she was, the lady was quite frail at times. They would fare poorly in this weather.

Steeling himself, Thor examined the area for any indication that Loki and Darcy had passed through. Finding none, he was forced to think back to Loki’s notes.

Where had he said they were going? Somewhere near the center of Jotunheim? And to get there they needed to use a passage in the East.

Thor congratulated himself on his memory and remembered the concepts of direction. Asgardians occasionally used North, East, South, and West as directional descriptors, however, they were not common because of their restrictions. Surely there were more than four ways to travel when need be. Nevertheless, Thor had to learn about them in order to be permitted to pilot a longship.

Looking to the sky, Thor searched for the telltale sign of the direction East. Thor could credit Loki for knowing a great deal more than him about many things, including the constellations and patterns of the sky. However, if Thor had ever been able to academically keep up with Loki in one thing, it was the stars.

Loki knew the finer points of the universe. He discovered them and took great interest in them. But Thor could look at the bigger parts. He saw the Nine Realms as a completed puzzle, every piece in its place. He saw what went where without knowing the piece’s origin.

And so, when Thor looked into the darkened sky of Jotunheim and saw the Winter Moon peek through the clouds, he knew that direction was East and he began walking without hesitation.

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“This is so great!” Darcy cheered, running through the snow with Jörmungandr and Fenrir on her heels. Happily, the three of them dived into a snow bank while Loki watched, unimpressed.

“Darcy,” he said calmly, “we are here for science, not to play in the snow. You have snow on Midgard.”

She pouted, digging her way out of the snow pile. “Yeah, but we don’t have this snow on Midgard. Plus, this place is awesome!”

Loki glanced around the lifeless arctic plains as the wind whistled past, gusting snow and ice in his face. “I do believe I disagree.”

Darcy laughed, dusting snow from her body as Jörmungandr and Fenrir continued chasing each other further ahead of their friends. “Oh, come on, Loki,” she encouraged, bouncing at his side. “As long as we’re breaking the law, we might as well have some fun.”

Loki glared her disbelieving. “Why are we friends? What cruel fate led me to befriend a miscreant such as you?”

The short Midgardian smirked at him. “Well, I love you too, Lokes.”

They frowned at each other for a few seconds before their faces cracked grins. Loki laughed and Darcy took his hand as they set off towards the proverbial cave in which Odin carved his infamous channel.

It was not even a mile in distance, but the air was cold and sharp. This did not bother Loki. As a matter of fact, he found the cool air rather refreshing. He breathed easy and the sharp chill felt
surprisingly good in his lungs. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Darcy.

They moved quick enough to keep her blood moving but slow enough so that her breathing would remain even. Once she started shivering, Loki cast a warming spell over her body.

Under normal circumstances, Loki would have no trouble casting a quick spell to warm his friend. His modified warming spells would raise her core temperature to keep her from freezing to death. The downside was that he could only maintain her specific core temperature.

If Darcy was cold, he could cast a warming spell to help her body maintain homeostasis. But her limbs could still get cold and she could still be uncomfortable. He could not warm these specific parts of her body too much without disturbing her overall bio-chemical balance.

Dealing with mortal health was a very precise magical science and it required focus. He explained this to Darcy and she accused him of worrying too much.

Finally, after measured paces and discussing their plans, they came to a wide cliff. It was a wall of pure frothy ice, creaking with age and wind echoing between the cracks. The terrain around them had become increasingly more littered with glacial peaked mounds of ice and uneven snowy ground. The air was sharper than the ice that whipped at their faces.

Fenrir and Jörmungandr didn’t seem to notice any difference in their weather conditions and continued to play. The serpent entertained himself by swallowing impressively large pieces of ice.

Darcy pressed herself closer into his side, the fur hood of her cloak tickling his cheek. “It should be somewhere up here.” She jerked her chin to the right, indicating that they walk further along the freezing wall.

Loki nodded, holding her closer to him. In almost no time at all, they came upon a tall, dark break in the icy fortification and stopped before it. This bleak, foreboding entrance fit every description of Odin’s cave. Darcy shifted under his arm, turning her face up to beam at him. “Found it.”

“Well,” he agreed, somehow managing to give a genuine smile even in the presence of the disconcerting entry way.

Confidently, Darcy disconnected herself from his side, calling to their pets. “Frank! Fenrir!” she shouted to the wind and in no time at all, the two animals appeared from the white storm looking both excited and frozen. Taking a deep breath, Darcy lifted her chin. “Alright, let’s go. The tunnel might have been sealed off from this end, but it’s in here somewhere.”

“I suppose we will see,” Loki said, grasping her hand as they stepped over the frozen threshold into the grotto.

It was warmer inside due to the lack of wind, though significantly darker. With a flourish of his hands, Loki cast a ball of golden light above their heads to illuminate the room. But the darkness was suffocating. It seemed to drown out Loki’s magic, leaving him, Darcy, Jörmungandr and Fenrir in a small circle of light.

He and Darcy shared an uneasy look. They knew where they were going, but the ominous feeling of their location was difficult to look past. Nevertheless, they crept on. The sudden silence of the cave encouraged their stealth.

“Loki?” Darcy whispered.

“Yes Darcy?” he responded, his breath coming in foggy puffs.
She pulled him in a little further. “Do you hear that?”

Loki stopped walking, cocking his head to the side and listening. Indeed, he could hear rather loud shuffling coming from somewhere outside the cave. His heart sped up and he spoke very quickly. “Darcy, I want you to listen to me very closely.”

“Okay,” she squeaked, squeezing his hand.

“You will do exactly what I tell you to do. The tunnel is somewhere along the walls. If I have to fight, you will find the tunnel and stay there, undetected. Do you understand?”

Even in fear, Darcy managed to let some of her irritation seep through. “Yeah, I’m mortal, not deaf. But if you have to fight, I’m fighting with you.”

The loud shuffling got closer and the white storm outside stirred, the blank wind hiding any potential dangers. Loki shifted so he was between the entrance of the cave and Darcy. “Darcy, being that I have subjected you to the fate of Frost Giants, I will bear whatever repercussions come our way.”

She snorted, tone rising just a bit. “Sure. Okay, well, you can bear the repercussions after I help save our lives.”

Loki turned to her, his back to the opening. “‘Our lives’. Darcy, your death is not a consequence I am willing to accept!”

“And you think I’m just going to wait by while you give up yours?! I’m not going to just take the consequences for your actions!” she quipped, voice rising.

Loki very nearly growled and the area around them began to shift. Ice cracked and from somewhere in the dark depths of their freezing cavern, the unmistakable sounds of a Jotunn stirred. “Go find the tunnel, Darcy!”

Darcy drew her swords. “Not a chance!”

Hands alight with magic, Loki faced his frustrating and death-obsessed friend. “Darcy—“

She squared her shoulders defiantly. “Loki—“

“DUCK!”

Without question, Loki grabbed Darcy by the shoulders, pulling her down to the ground as the solid mass of Mjolnir sailed over their heads. Loki looked behind him just in time to see the monstrous form of a Frost Giant sink to the ground, a hammer buried solidly in its blue chest.

Darcy’s head poked up from under his arm. “I totally had that.”

Loki scoffed, standing and taking Darcy with him. “You would have been iced over and then eaten as a frozen treat!”

From the wintry storm outside, Thor emerged, blonde hair frozen with snow and ice. “Loki—“

“Thor, what are you doing here?” Loki turned on his brother, his tone reflecting a flurry of emotions. Thor was not supposed to be there. Why, by the name of Odin, was Thor on Jotunheim!? Thor crossed his arms, incredulously. “Surely you jest. You are the one that came here first!”
“And you followed me?!” Loki yelled back, unaware that Darcy was wandering closer to the fallen Frost Giant with Jörmungandr and Fenrir at her heels.

“Heimdall granted me passage to come and save you! And lucky he did! You could not stop arguing with Lady Darcy long enough to slay a giant!” Thor argued. “And since when do you, Loki of Asgard, defy the word of the Allfather to go to Jotunheim?”

Loki’s expression became blank and cool. “Since I made it my business to. Go back to Asgard, brother. I am preoccupied.”

Thor glared at him with absolute disbelief. “What on Jotunheim could possibly have you so preoccupied?!”

“Nothing of your concern,” Loki said, bringing down his volume. “Now leave, before this gets any worse.”

“Worse?” Thor questioned, grabbing Loki’s shoulder. “How could this be worse!? Is this what you do when you’re gone for days at a time? Wandering through Jotunheim? Putting yourself and the Lady Darcy in danger?”

“Hold your tongue, brother!” Loki hissed, anger pulsing in his smoldering green eyes. “Speak not of what you do not know.”

“And allow you to continue putting yourself in danger!? Since when do you go anywhere without Mother’s permission!? Thor demanded, bearing down on his brother.

But Loki was no longer shorter than Thor and he faced him head on. “Since when do you have any care as to what I do!?”

“You are too weak to be out on your own!”

At this, Loki laughed, dark and humorlessly. “Says you. Thor Odinson, the strongest of them all.”

Thor shoved his shoulder, “Well you are not exactly strapping are you?”

“As if you could possibly know,” Loki scoffed. “Go back to Asgard. Whatever you hoped to gain from following me, there is none of it here. Kill another bilgesnipe. Battle more griffins. Your presence is counterproductive to my purpose on Jotunheim.”

Thor opened his mouth to retort when the temperature of their cave noticeably dropped several degrees.

At once, Loki whipped around, searching for Darcy. His eyes had adjusted to the dark and he caught sight of her trailing along the walls. Relief settled in him for only the barest of seconds, for no sooner had he seen his friend, the Frost Giant that Thor had overpowered began to move.

And he moved fast.

In an instant, the once unconscious Jotunn was on his feet, tossing Mjolnir to the far side of the cave and Loki saw it hit the wall right by where Darcy stood. She threw herself out of the way, Jörmungandr and Fenrir circling around her protectively.

Loki’s hands lit with magic, green flames licking up his arms as he ran to get to Darcy’s side. But before he could reach his dear mortal friend, a thick wall of ice came between them.
“Darcy!” he shouted, needing to hear the sound of her voice. Was she alright? Why had he not been at her side? Why, by the name of all that was good, did Thor have to interrupt their expedition?

“Loki?” her muffled echoed back and Loki lifted one fiery palm to the ice wall. He would blow it to smithereens. He would—

His thoughts were interrupted by a series of bark-like-hisses, hiss-like-barks and the low, icy voice of the previously incapacitated Jotunn. He stood taller than the wall he had built, his bare chest marked with ropey lines just lighter in hue than his frozen skin. Stony green armor was pieced together along his body and one of his hands melded into an ice spike taller than Loki.

“Who dares to enter this place?” growled the Frost Giant, his chilling voice sending threatening tremors through the air.

Loki extinguished the fire in his hands. He could not risk violence now. Not when he was, once again, illegally traveling through a forbidden realm and Darcy was in danger. He would have to be cunning. He would--

“I am Thor Odinson, Prince of Asgard! And you, Giant, will give back the Lady Darcy immediately or answer to my wrath!”

Loki’s jaw dropped. “Oh, by the Norns.”

The Frost Giant looked down at Thor skeptically for a moment before bursting out into earth quaking laughter. “An Aesir? A mere son of Odin is no match for me, Thrymr!”

Loki wanted to go smack Thor over his big blonde head.

Thrymr. Just his luck that it would be Thrymr to separate him and Darcy. He was Laufey’s predecessor. The Jotunns believed him to be one of the best Kings they ever had. He was often referred to in Asgardian culture as ‘The Giant King’ because of his overall size and was possibly the largest Frost Giant ever to live. Though, Thrymr’s physical size did not match his wit. There are many a tale of his dumb mistakes as King, each having to do with his blundering errors and lack of insight. The Jotunar decided that Laufey was better suited to lead them in battle. Hence, Thrymr was overthrown by his more cunning adversary before the start of the Great War.

“You risk your life for what, Asgardian?” Thrymr taunted, reaching behind the ice wall, his giant hand emerging with an infuriated Darcy Lewis in his grip. “This tiny thing?”

Thor snarled, reaching out his hand to call Mjolnir. But before he could put Darcy in further danger, Loki pushed his brother aside, halting any attempts to bring forth his weapon. They were in no position to be starting fights while his friend was caught in the cold grip of a dangerous monster.

“Hey! I. Am. Not. A. Thing. You overgrown frozen blueberry!” Darcy argued, kicking her legs back and forth, trying to shake Thrymr’s hold from around the center of her body.

Loki decided at that moment that he was truly the only one in that cave worried for Darcy’s safety. Really. Why not just sacrifice her now?

“A fiery one, is she not?” Thrymr chuckled, grinning at Darcy like she was no more than an amusing toy of sorts.

Loki’s heart raced and he spoke, his tongue keeping his true anxieties secret. “No, Lord Thrymr.
Please, forgive this Prince. He knew not of your identity when he threatened you. We Aesir can be rather thick in our skulls at times. For if he had known it was the Great Thrymr in this dwelling, he would not have spoken so brashly. Even now that he has angered you, he quakes in fear.”

Thor gave Loki a dumbfounded look. “Loki, what…”

Loki gave his brother a shrewd look. “See, Lord Thrymr, how Prince Thor whispers. Clearly he is horrified by your very presence!”

Thrymr acknowledged Loki with ease, taking his praise with the attitude of someone who believed they deserved respect. “As he should be! Tell me, Wise Asgardian, what value this,” he indicated to Darcy by waving her around, “mouthy creature has to a Prince of Asgard?”

Loki’s blood was pounding in his veins. “That creature? She is entertaining, is she not? And she is a fine Lady of Asgard, destined to one day be married to a High Lord of the Court.”

Thrymr smiled a spine chilling smile. His fangs were near transparent and his blood red eyes appraised Darcy. “So, you could say, that this Lady is invaluable? An object worthy of trade?”

“How about just a person? I’d like to point out that I. AM. NOT. AN. OBJECT. YOU. GIANT. SMURF.” She kicked harder and this time, she ended her statement by spitting on Thrymr’s face.

“Oh perfect.” Loki muttered as Thrymr growled at this offense.

“Girl! You dare to—“

Darcy interrupted him, crossing her arms, though Loki suspected it was to ward off the shivers coursing through her small shoulders. “Yeah! So now you can start referring to me with some form of respect!”

“I do not respect mine enemy!”

“Well, I don’t respect people who hold me captive!”

“I apprehend those who trespass upon my territory!”

“I spit on people who jerk me around like a plaything!”

Thrymr snarled, turning back to Loki. “This is the despicable lady you wish to save?”

Loki held out his hands, open palms up. “There is but one of her.”

“May truer words never be spoken,” the past king grumbled in agreement. “So be it! I will return her to you, and the Prince’s favored weapon, under one condition.”

Thor stepped forwards at the mention of his hammer and Loki put a hand on his brother’s chest to hold him back. “And what condition might that be, oh generous one?”

Thrymr grinned, tightening his hand around Darcy’s middle and causing her breath to catch. Her pouty blue lips parted and Loki could have leveled the entire cave. But he could not risk such a thing with Darcy’s life in the bargain. “Bring me the Queen of Asgard, Queen Frigga. I will wed her and my isolation amongst these lifeless plains will end! If you so value this insolent little girl,” he squeezed Darcy just a little tighter to make his point and Loki felt his heart break, “then bring me Frigga and she will be my bride.”

Thor opened his mouth to object, but Loki spoke first. “It shall be done.”
At his words, Thrymr released Darcy, letting her now limp form fall behind the wall. “I await your return, Asgardians.”

And with that, he drew up a slab of ice from the frozen earth, using it to push the two princes from his cave.

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Frigga glared at Heimdall, not even bothering to speak.

The Guardian shifted uneasily, “My Queen…”

“Did you at least tell him to dress warmly?” she asked, tone sharp and unforgiving.

“Yes, My Queen,” Heimdall assured, suddenly very glad indeed that he had sent Thor back to retrieve warmer attire.

Her gaze flicked to the worlds below, as if trying to make out her son’s positions. “Has he found them?”

Heimdall nodded a short affirmative, “Indeed he has.”

“And?”

Heimdall dared a glance back at Jotunheim where a certain prince was very…very…angry. “They may be in some mild danger.”

Frigga cocked a brow. “How mild?”

“Mild enough,” he answered vaguely, taking another second to explain their situation. “The Princes are in no current danger. Either of them alone could deal with this specific threat.”

“But…?” The Allmother queried.

“But,” Heimdall continued, “Darcy Lewis is at risk and Prince Loki—“

Frigga held up a firm but gentle hand to stop his words. “Say no more. I trust them to handle their own lives.”

Heimdall was shocked at Queen Frigga’s response. Thrymr was no small giant and the Asgardian Princes faced a challenge most unlike any before. The last time he and his Queen had stood on the edge of the Bifrost bridge, she was in hysterics at the possibility that Loki may die. However, it was much more likely that he would have died on Muspelheim than on Jotunheim.

Even so, her answer confused him.

Frigga noticed his puzzlement and offered a small smile. “They are getting older, Heimdall. A mother can only rule her children’s lives for so long. If they are going to make these kinds of decisions, they must learn to battle through the consequences. I will intervene if necessary.”

Her certainty was astounding and did a great deal to lessen Heimdall’s concern for the three young ones. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

She nodded once, whirling away from the edge of the Bifrost and back towards her horse. After a few steps, she seemed to remember something and turned back to the Gatekeeper. “Oh and, Good Heimdall, when Thrymr has been taken care of, bring Thor back, but not Darcy and Loki. They
Heimdall bowed at her word. He allowed himself some leniency with the King’s orders, as he believed they were sometimes flawed. But disobeying the Queen was not something Heimdall was so soon prepared to do.

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“Loki, this is ridiculous!”

“It is necessary!”

Thor scowled, shouting over the whipping winds of Jotunheim. The storm had intensified and the air was as white as the snow. “This is not necessary! Loki hear reason!” he demanded. “I can fight our way out of this and kill Thrymr if I simply call Mjolnir—“

Loki’s entire being was close to bursting into tiny, angry pieces. “THOR, IF YOU CALL YOUR HAMMER WHILE DARCY’S LIFE IS BEING THREATENED BY THE STRONGEST FROST GIANT EVER TO LIVE, I WILL KILL YOU MYSELF!”

The older brother held up his hands in defense. “Brother, calm yourself. Surely Darcy is not in dang—“

“Do not tell me she is not in danger!” Loki shouted, throwing up his hands and growling at the wintry sky. “Her position is the very definition of danger! She is illegally on a realm being held captive by its former king while she slowly freezes to death in some icy den!” He turned to his brother, green eyes standing out against the crisp white snow. “You will not call your hammer.”

The force of Loki’s words struck something in Thor. Slowly, Loki could see the direness of their situation sink in. “Loki, what would be the consequence of killing Thrymr?”

Loki shook his head, “I am not sure. Past kings on Jotunheim do not hold much grandeur. They are simply…well…citizens. Thrymr mentioned that he was isolated. It is possible that his death may mean nothing to Jotunheim. Still, his death and his killers are two entirely different things.”

Thor watched his brother with narrowed, curious eyes. “What is your plan, if not to attack? We cannot give him Mother to marry. She is already wed to Father!”

Despite their situation, Loki could not help but roll his eyes. With an errant wave of his hand, he stilled the air around them, entrapping the two in a quiet, snow-lacking circle. “Thor, do not be ridiculous. Thrymr is infamous for his stupidity. He could have asked us for anything in exchange for Darcy, knowing her worth to us—“

“—you—“

“—and he asks for the Allmother to wed. No doubt he’s trying to both shame the Allfather and regain some kind of royal power. His methods are juvenile to say the least.”

Thor rubbed his chin in thought. “Then what do you propose we do?”

For the first time since Thor appeared on Jotunheim, Loki offered a smile. Although it was full of promises of the mischief to come, it was a genuine. “I suggest we take advantage of this situation.”

***
Darcy groaned as quietly as possible, shifting on the icy floor.

Thrymr was not one to take it easy on the mortals.

She was sufficiently beat. Her waist was no doubt bruised from his cold hands’ iron grip and was tender to touch. The giant had treated her without the slightest precaution and had dropped her from his great height onto the icy ground she now sat on. Luckily, she could walk alright, and her body seemed fine with the exception of some bruising on her knees. On the downside, her left wrist had given an audible crack upon her descent from Thrymr’s grasp.

And she was cold.

Oh boy, was she cold.

Fenrir and Frank were at her side in an instant, making obvious sounds of distress.

“Don’t worry about me, guys. I’m alright,” she whispered to them, keeping her wrist close to her body. With her good arm trembling, Darcy picked up a handful of coarse, icy snow and packed it around her damaged wrist, biting back the sharp pain.

Fenrir licked her gloved thumb and she wondered how the two animals were staying warm. They didn’t appear to be affected by the harsh temperatures of Jotunheim and Darcy wondered if it was because of their new magical state. Whatever it was, Darcy wasn’t concerned. As long as they were warm.

Taking easy breaths, Darcy took careful note of her surroundings. Her eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness of the cave and she could make out, even without her glasses, that this icy hole in a wall was actually a dwelling of sorts. There were carved arches that led off to other rooms and the vaulted ceiling was at least four Frost Giants tall.

All of this could be seen from Darcy’s enclosure.

Thrymr moved around in one of his rooms, muttering to himself. Darcy caught words like ‘wife’ and ‘consummation’. A chill went down Darcy’s spine as she remembered Loki’s bargain.

Frigga in exchange for Darcy and Mjolnir.

Darcy was not an idiot. She knew that there was no way Loki would agree to such a ridiculous thing without a proper plan. But Darcy did not know of that plan. She knew that, at the moment, she was in danger.

And Loki really hated it when Darcy was in danger.

She knew that Loki would rather protect Darcy than worry about himself. That’s why, this time, she had to take matters into her own hands.

Rolling her shoulders, Darcy got to her feet, staring at the ice wall that confined her to the lone corner of Thrymr’s cave. The logical escape plan would be to ask Frank to eat Thrymr. Darcy wasn’t a huge fan of killing people and that included Frost Giants. It could be justified in that, if Frank were to eat Thrymr, the giant would be a part of the food chain. It was not murder because Frank had to eat and Thrymr was a ready meal.

But Darcy couldn’t bring herself to do it. As convenient as it would be to have Frank eat all of her enemies, there was something extremely disturbing to Darcy about that.
Because her giving Frank a command to eat someone was murder. Frank had only ever eaten one person that she knew of, and that was on Muspelheim. But King Surtur was trying to have her killed and it was an official battle. Frank was defending her and he did so on his own accord. It was his way of keeping Darcy alive.

But Thrymr wasn’t trying to kill her. He may not have had a whole lot of respect for her life, but he wasn’t trying to kill her.

Darcy clutched her wrist, thinking hard.

Loki’s plan would likely not do anything to endanger Darcy’s survival. There was a large possibility that if said plan succeeded, then he and Darcy would not be able to continue their search for the Tesseract.

Suddenly, an idea struck her. There was a possibility that the entrance to Odin’s tunnel was in her corner. It would have been iced over, but hopefully not filled. If she could find it, Darcy could escape down that tunnel where Thrymr couldn’t reach her and Loki would not have to worry about her being a hostage.

He would eventually see the hole in the wall and he could find her down there after Thrymr was taken care of. Darcy strongly believed that Thrymr would not kill Loki and Thor. If he had any intentions of killing them, he would have done it when they first stepped into his domain.

Murdering the two princes of Asgard would only start war between Asgard and Jotunheim. Neither were ready for a war. In fact, killing the princes might put Thrymr in a rather detrimental political position. It would be completely plausible on Jotunheim for him to lose his life for such an endangerment to their already weakened realm.

With attentive eyes, Darcy checked her surroundings, finding all the walls to be intact with the exception of the cracked section where Mjolnir was buried in the ice.

Hurriedly, Darcy maneuvered herself to the wall, careful not to slip and damage herself any further. Loki was already going to be really upset about her wrist.

With her good hand, she grasped Mjolnir’s handle and tugged the blunt weapon free.

“Oh sweet Frigga!” Darcy cried once the hammer was in her hand and she quickly set it down at her feet. Frank and Fenrir gave her worried looks and Fenrir whined at the hammer.

Darcy shook her head. “No wonder Thor’s arms are so big. This thing is seriously heavy.”

Shaking out her arm, Darcy looked to the hole where Mjolnir had previously been and gasped. The rectangular space that the hammer had occupied was now empty, but behind it, there was a dark tunneling passage that reeked of Odin Allfather.

“Bingo,” she murmured, silently thanking Thor for his unintentionally good aim. “Frank, Fen, this is it. This is the tunnel,” she told them in a whisper, checking over her shoulder to make sure Thrymr was still in his other room.

The animals got excited and Frank lifted his body to poke his head through the hole Mjolnir had made. Darcy rolled her eyes at him. “We have to get through there, silly.”

She looked uncertainly down at Mjolnir, then back to the hole. “And I think I know how to do it. You might wanna move, Frank,” she warned, bending down to wrap her fingers around Mjolnir’s leather grip.
Bending at the knees, Darcy used her entire body to lift Thor’s weapon of choice. It was a hammer, made for smashing stuff. She could totally do this.

Darcy knew how bodies worked and because of this she didn’t try to lift Mjolnir all the way into the air and swing it with one arm like Thor might. He was Asgardian and a whole lot stronger than her. If she tried to lift the hammer like its owner lifted it, she would end up hurting herself. Instead, she used both hands, rocking her body back and forth, building up enough momentum to strike the cover of ice right along its crack.

In four hits, she had the ice broken down enough for someone as tall as Loki to get inside.

Her wrist throbbed as she stared into the prefigured tunnel. It was tall enough and wide enough for one Aesir to walk through at a time and she could sense, even from where she stood, a very strong kind of magic. It made her skin tingle and her hairs stand on end. Jotunheim’s chill offered the magic clarity. It was almost as if the spell had recently been cast.

Darcy was rather proud of how good she was becoming at sensing magic. Being around Loki all the time really helped with that. He told her that all living things had the potential to use and detect magic. However, those who never had exposure to it would never get the opportunity to try their hand at it.

Even though Darcy could feel some magical indicators, they were purely sensory. She couldn’t determine what kind of spell it was or when it was cast, like Loki could. She could guess based on what she knew, but she couldn’t do any more than that.

For this scenario, Darcy guessed that Odin had used Gungnir to carve out the tunnel so the Aesir could get through. Darcy supposed that the Jotunns knew about the passage, however, it was entirely possible that they didn’t. The ice could have come to form over the tunnel with time and Thrymr could have just come to live in a secluded area that was coincidentally the same location as the tunnel.

While this was a viable prospect, Darcy decided it wasn’t very likely.

A more believable theory was that Laufey, current king of Jotunheim, had known about the tunnel and tried to destroy it. But Odin had cast magic on the passage that made it indestructible. Laufey then put an order out for it to be covered at both ends and assigned the duty of guarding it to Thrymr, the former king who still believed he was a necessary part of Jotunheim.

Darcy steeled her nerves before speaking. “This is it guys. It’s about two miles from here to the Heart of Jotunheim. We’ll get as far as we can until Loki catches up,” she explained to her friends.

They blinked up at her in understanding. Darcy bit her lip for a moment, the heat of her mouth comforting against her cold lips. “Wait, one of you stay behind for Loki, okay? He needs to know that we’re okay. You know how he gets really worried? And then his eyebrows do the thing?” she asked the animals and they gave her agreeing looks.

“Yeah…” she sighed knowingly. “So, will one of you stay?”

Fenrir whined and Frank made some strange noise. The two chased each other around in a tight circle before Frank slithered up Darcy’s body and Fenrir sat dutifully next to Mjolnir. Darcy knelt down to rub his ears. “Be safe, Fen. Don’t do anything too stupid, okay?”

He licked her chin in response.

She smiled, adjusting her gloves and her coat so they would keep her warm while traveling through
the bowels of Jotunheim. “For Science,” Darcy breathed, a hint of sarcasm in her tone as she determinedly ran forth into the depths of the tunnel.

***

Loki smoothed out the front of his dress, looking appreciatively at his brother.

Thor had his arms crossed and was thoroughly unimpressed. “Loki. No.”

The Prince of Mischief smirked, running a hand through his hair as he noted Thor’s dress. “It is a curious thing to me, why men do not wear dresses. This is quite a liberating experience.”

Thor beat angrily at the white skirts that swished around his legs. “Loki! This is a preposterous plan! You truly expect Thrymr to believe that I am Frigga?! I am, quite clearly, a man!”

Sighing, Loki conjured a mirror, imagining how odd they must look standing in the middle of the blizzard, adjusting their dresses. Loki had no qualms about dressing as a woman. For some reason, it did not bother him. Perhaps it was because he was so sure of his manhood. He knew he was a male and this practice was to do no more than trick a dumb giant. The whole situation was rather hilarious.

At first he had magically changed his entire body to that of a woman’s. Then Thor, to use the Midgardian phrase, ‘freaked out’, and Loki changed back for his sake.

Still, despite Darcy’s current state, making Thor uncomfortable with his genius plan was quite entertaining. Thor, who was typically brash and dwelled on his manliness, was utterly beside himself about wearing a dress.

“Thor, if you had just allowed me to do the talking, we would not be in this predicament.” Loki chided, holding up the mirror for Thor to see his reflection. His brother sneered and batted the reflective frame away.

“Loki!” He growled and Loki shushed him, making the mirror disappear in a wave of his hands.

“Oh stop that. Now be a good Bride-Queen and put on your veil.” Loki said, magicking a white veil onto Thor’s head.

Thor grunted and lifted the fabric from in front of his face to reveal his less than cordial expression. “Lo-ki!”

Loki dropped his taunting smirk, realizing that his brother truly had a problem with wearing a dress. “Thor, you are being absurd.”

Thor stared at him blankly, making vague gestures to the cave, then to Loki, then to himself. “You dress me up as a woman, proclaim me to be my mother, and betroth me to a Frost Giant all to save your friend, who is more than capable of saving herself, yet you say that I am the one being absurd?”

Loki nodded. “Yes. It is just an article of clothing. You are not bare; I do not see what the problem is.”

This did not seem to be the case with Thor. “Loki,” he said firmly, “I am a man. Men do not wear dresses!”

“Yet, here we are,” Loki countered, holding out Thor’s skirts for him to see. Thor batted them back
down.

“Perhaps all those hours in the library have robbed you of your sanity, brother. When we get back
to Asgard, I’m taking you to Eir,” Thor said, adjusting his veil absentmindedly.

Loki smacked his hands away from the fabric, fixing it himself. “Thor, you have said quite plainly
that you are indeed a man. Are you not confident in that fact?”

“Of course I am confident in that—“

“Then what have you to fear?” Loki argued flippantly, conjuring himself a wreath of flowers to
place on his head. Darcy would call it a ‘flower crown’. “If you know that you are a man, and you
believe yourself to be that, then why should the article of clothing you wear determine you to be
any different?”

Thor stared at his brother, disbelieving. “It is women’s clothing.”

“So?” Loki questioned. “Sif wears armor and pants, does she not? This is men’s clothing, as many
have told her before, yet she is still a woman, is she not?”

Thor choked on his words for a moment and Loki gave him time to respond. “That is different.”

“How?” Loki asked, interested as to what went on in Thor’s head as of late. Admittedly, they had
not been spending a lot of time together.

Thor huffed, “It is different that Sif wears men’s clothing. She is to be a warrior, strengthened—“

“And to be made a man in the eyes of her comrades?” Loki inquired.

Thor shook his head vigorously. “No! Sif is a woman. She wears armor so she will not get a sword
in the gut!” he protested.

“Precisely,” Loki agreed. “She wears armor as protection because it is necessary while fighting,
just as you are wearing a dress because it is necessary to fool a dumb giant. Fabric does not have a
mind, Thor. It has an owner, and currently, its owner is male.”

Thor stared at his brother for a long moment as the storm raged on around them. Thankfully, they
were still protected inside Loki’s circle of magic. “Why make this argument now? Certainly it
could be applied to any subject matter, including magic. Why not say these things to Fandrall when
he teases you? Or share your ideas with Sif to use as defense?”

Loki thought about that for a moment when he realized, for the first time in his life, he did not give
a damn about what Fandrall thought. And he did not hold enough affection in his heart for Sif to
endure her dirty look if he were to first approach her. He cared about Darcy, not his brother’s
friends.

The thought of Darcy brought him back to their predicament.

“I suppose I had no reason to,” Loki said simply. “Besides, I do not need to convince Fandrall to
wear a dress to go rescue Darcy. Now put your veil down and follow my lead.”

Dressed in their ceremonial wedding garments, the two brothers made their way to the front of
Thrymr’s cave where the ice slab was still in place. Loki cleared his throat and spoke in a high
pitched mockery of a woman’s voice. “Oh Great Thrymr! It is I! Ikol Nidodottir! Bridesmaid to
Queen Frigga! We have come for the wedding!”
Thor turned to Loki. “Ikol Nidodottir?”

Loki shrugged. “It is my name backwards. I sincerely doubt that Thrymr is going to take the time to figure it out.”

Thor nodded in understanding, “Ah. Yes. Very well.”

There was a great deal of noise from inside the cave when at long last, the ice was pushed aside to reveal Thrymr, a large, goading smile on his monstrous face. “Ah, so the little pest is worth even more to Asgard than its’ Queen. How fitting both should now fall into my grasp!”

Loki clasped his hands together, forcing down the bile that rose in his throat. He had let Darcy stay in the hands of this beast to play dress up with Thor. He was a horrible friend. Was she alright? What would Thrymr do to her?

The Jotunn barked out a laugh, moving aside to guide the boys into his dwelling. “Ah, yes. She is unharmed, of course. I believed she would mean quite a bit to Asgard and I would not want to start off my marriage to the lovely Frigga on the note of my mistreatment of a woman. I would not want my bride to have warm feet.”

Thor made a series of loud gagging noises that Loki assumed were involuntary. He quickly spoke for his brother. “You must forgive, Queen Frigga. She was just so moved by your words! You can see she has already stopped loving the Allfather in favor of you! A real…um…yes!”

Thrymr hummed in agreement as he appraised Thor’s figure. “I did not expect your return so soon! Lady Ikol, would you do us the honor of wedding me to my lovely bride? We can do so right here in the parlor.”

Loki responded in his girlish voice, loudly as to overpower Thor’s chortles and poorly disguised sounds of distress. Now was the time to be clever. “Of course I will!”

Thrymr beamed proudly. “Then get to it, woman! Then my lovely wife and I will consummate our union.”

Thor coughed loudly under his veil and Loki patted him reassuringly on the hand. “Oh, dear, Giant Thrymr…you have perturbed the Queen!”

Thrymr looked offended for a moment and he glared down at Loki. “Perturbed?! I have said nothing but the truth!”

Thor coughed again, this time it sounded more like wheezing. Loki wanted to roll his eyes for his brother was truly being a Queen. A Queen of Drama that is.

“Oh! No! Lord Thrymr, I only meant that you had…” he leaned in a little closer and whispered intently to the former King, “…you have stirred her, in a sense. Yes? She cannot stifle these new feelings you have …awakened.”

Thrymr caught on to Loki’s gist and grinned widely. “AH! Rightly so! A man should have that effect on his bride! Come, Ikol! On with the vows! I wish not to wait any longer!”

“Of course!” Loki shrieked effeminately. He paused for a moment, waiting. “Well?”

Thrymr looked down at him, confused. “What? What are you waiting for? On with it!”

Loki gasped, throwing his arms dramatically around Thor’s head. “Oh no! You mustn’t listen to
him my Queen! I truly hope he has not forgotten!”

Thor played along, offering a wail that sounded somewhere between a baby’s cry and a pig squeal. Thrymr reacted very strongly to this, “What? What is wrong with my bride? What am I to do?”

Loki continued patting Thor’s arm until his settled his theatrical noises. “My Lord, the wedding presents! Surely you have a strong weapon to gift the Queen? It is a part of our custom! She cannot go through with a marriage until you have gifted her with the weapon of her peoples! That way, you are assuring her of safety in matrimony!”

Thrymr bought into Loki’s lie without question. “Right you are, Lady Ikol! I believe I have just the weapon! Your son left it here by mistake, I believe! I was going to give it back to him when he came to visit you on your new realm, but I can see that it is needed now more than ever!”

As the Jotunn turned to the ice wall he had created, Loki searched for Darcy. He did not see her, nor could he hear her. He was about to cast a spell to properly search for her when Thrymr returned, Mjolnir between his fingers.

“I have this tiny hammer for you, my bride!” He called, holding out the weapon.

Loki clapped his hands, feigning enthusiasm. “How wonderful! Now, present the weapon to Frigga and we will start the ceremony!”

Thrymr got down on one knee so that he could properly hand Thor his hammer.

The moment Mjolnir was back in Thor’s hand, things escalated, but not in the way Thrymr was hoping.

The air crackled with electricity and a powerful bolt of lightning struck through the mouth of the cave, hitting Thrymr directly in the face, blowing him back against his ice wall. The fortification crumbled under his weight and Loki rushed forwards, shouted out to Darcy as Thor beat Thrymr across the face.

“Darcy! Jörmungandr! Fenrir!” he called to them, hurrying into the corner where Thrymr had kept them.

Just when Loki thought all hope was lost, Fenrir scampered forwards, his tongue lolling happily.

“Fenrir, where is Darcy?”

Fenrir said nothing, whining a little bit and turning his attention to Thor and Thrymr. The Frost Giant was just now figuring out that he had been conned and was bellowing in pain as Thor hit him again with lightening.

Loki was panicked and scared and it was all because Darcy Lewis was once again in trouble. His anxiety flared as Thor’s hammer came down upon Thrymr again. If completely discombobulated, the once ‘Great King’ would not be able to tell him where Darcy was.

In a dangerous act of desperation, Loki magically pushed Thor away, crouching on the Giant’s chest, perforated with Mjolnir-shaped holes. He conjured a dagger and pressed it up against the Jotun’s cold throat. “Where is she?”

Thrymr’s red eyes stared at him, openly horrified at the prince before him. When he didn’t answer, Loki grew livid, pressing his knee into the Giant’s wounds. The cold blood of his enemy drenched his skirts and Thrymr choked on his pain. “I do not know. She…she was here…”
An idea struck Loki and he looked back to Fenrir who sat devotedly near a smallish hole in the cave wall.

Darcy had found the tunnel.

Loki wanted to feel bad for treating this Giant as such. He wanted to feel something other than pity as he looked down at the bloodied giant beneath him.

Thrymr, former King of Jotunheim. He disgraced his title, many times over. He acted dumbly. He risked the lives of his people for nothing. He was a dumb king and a poor leader. Even now, after his reign, he clung sorely to what little power he had in his size and strength.

He saw a monster who was known for killing thousands of Aesir during the Great War and had thrown around his friend like little more than a play toy and still managed to think himself attractive even to ladies who openly found his entire race despicable.

There was nothing about Thrymr that wasn’t pitiful to Loki.

And so he considered the swipe of his dagger across the Jotunn’s throat an act of mercy. Monsters did not deserve mercy. If the Allfather ever taught him anything, it was that.

Blood of purple hue stained Loki’s hands as he lifted himself from Thrymr’s chest, stepping down onto the ground and magicking his dagger away. Thor stood before him, his dress splattered in blood, jaw slack in disbelief. “Loki…”

The younger prince glared at his brother, waving his hands to change Thor’s outfit back into his warm armor and cloak. “Get back to Asgard. Go outside, call for Heimdall. I will dispose of this.”

Thor continued staring at Loki as he changed his dress back into leather and metal, glowering at the fresh corpse of Thrymr. “Loki, you have slain him, quite literally, in cold blood.”

“And indeed,” Loki muttered gathering his energy and waving his hands over the dead giant. With no more than a thought, the once Great Giant, Thrymr was all but a pile of cold stones. “Let us not dwell on the obvious. Leave, Thor. No doubt Thrymr was stupidly isolated, but anyone could show up and we could get Asgard into even more trouble than it is already. Depart. Darcy and I will meet you on Asgard.”

“How? What are you doing here, Brother?” Thor asked, less demanding than usual.

“Be gone!” Loki ordered once more.

The two stared at each other until Thor finally relented. “So be it, Brother. But, be warned, if anyone inquires about your presence—”

“Yes yes, tell them I am a disobedient prince, gallivanting about on Jotunheim and wearing pretty dresses,” Loki mocked.

Thor shook his head. “If anyone inquires about your presence, I shall tell them I do not know.” He reached over and clapped Loki on the shoulder. “Find Darcy and send her my regards. I advise you against this ‘business’ you have on Jotunheim. But I cannot stop you. Be safe.”

Loki, slightly appalled by Thor’s words, could think of nothing to say except:

“You know, you don’t look terrible in a dress.”
Thor gave a hearty laugh, his arms still splattered in Jotunn blood as he left the cave, “I will see you soon, Brother. Do not anger any more Frost Giants!”

“I would not dream of it,” Loki muttered, letting his smile fade as he hurried to the tunnel entrance.

The magic emanating from it was potent and he quickly identified it as Odin’s spell. Of course, his magic was different from Loki’s - he channeled it, using Gungnir as a conduit. It was a simple enchantment, designed to make something physically indestructible. This would explain why the tunnel hadn’t been filled.

Fenrir nosed his leg and whined again, and Loki detected worry. “Fenrir, has Darcy been hurt?”

He whined again and Loki assumed the worst.

She was somewhere in this tunnel, possibly a mile along if she had been running.

With trembling hands, Loki settled himself closer to Fenrir and, without further hesitation, transported them to Darcy’s side.

***

Darcy was too cold.

She had run for a while to keep her blood moving, but the air had become too cold and it hurt to breathe. Frank worried himself, sliding over her body as if searching for some way to alleviate her distress.

She tried to console him, but the only sounds that came out were chatters. Her teeth clacked together and she slipped her hands into her coat, finding a little more heat closer to her body. Loki’s warming spell must not have been as deeply seated as she anticipated, that or it was not structured to adapt to the colder temperatures. Otherwise, her core temperature would have remained constant.

Suddenly, in a flash of green light, Loki was there. He stood, tall, dark and bloodied, his face morphed into an expression of distress that only worsened when he laid eyes on her.

“Darcy Lewis, you are more trouble than you are worth,” he sighed, pulling her into his chest.

She shivered and nodded, eager to be warm and to be assured of Loki’s safety. Why was he covered in blood? Was he okay? Her thoughts were interrupted as a wave of heat washed over her and Loki’s magic brushed over her body. She shuddered at the feeling, the unmistakable presence of her best friend a comfort.

Loki, reaching down and taking her wrist. “You are hurt.” His magic went over her again and this time, Darcy spoke.

“It’s not too bad,” she told him as his hand cupped her face, thumb brushing over her cheek. Whether this assurance for his sake or hers, Darcy was unsure.

“Not too bad?” he repeated callously, “Darcy, that monster has caused you internal damage that, for a Midgardian, would take months to heal. The spell I cast has long since faded, leaving you to the freeze in this cold. If you were to be found, no doubt you would be either arrested, slaughtered or worse…” he paused to breathe, his expression near menacing. “And yet, you run into this potentially hazardous tunnel without me and claim that your condition is ‘not so bad’.” Loki looked like he could kill and, for a moment, Darcy was scared. Not of Loki, but rather Loki’s rage.
It was so rare that he ever got angry and he had never been so harsh tongued with her.

Darcy sniffed and a hot tear wet her frigid cheek. “I’m sorry.”

Immediately, Loki’s features softened as he realized the depth of his words. Without question, he began to console her. “Oh no, Darcy, do not cry. Do not be sorry. It is not your fault.”

Darcy only cried harder and Loki cast his magic over her body to heal her wounds. “Don’t be mad anymore, Loki,” she said, pulling away to wipe her tears. Loki brushed them away with his thumb, leaving swipes of Jotunn blood on her cheekbones.

Disgusted, he magically cleaned his hands and her face. He looked down at her quite seriously, “Darcy, know that I am not angry with you. I just…” he sighed, pulling her into a more secure embrace and tucking her head under his chin. “…I thought I might have been too late.”

“Fenrir waited for you so that you wouldn’t freak out,” Darcy sniffed, pressing her face into his neck. “You didn’t do anything stupid did you?”

Loki pressed his lips together. “Define ‘stupid’.”

Darcy pulled away from, eyes rimmed red and a scowl on her pretty face. “You’re covered in Jotunn blood. Or, you were.”

He grimaced at the thought. “Thrymr is no longer guarding Odin’s channel.”

“Loki!”

He moved his hands to her shoulders, explaining himself. “Darcy, he hurt you! I thought he had killed you or worse! He said he didn’t, but he was spewing all kinds of lies to impress Thor!”

Darcy cocked her head to the side. “Impress Thor?”

“He was pretending to be Frigga,” Loki clarified. “I have killed him, yes. But he was a monster, Darcy.”

Darcy’s jaw clenched and her pouty lips tightened. “He was not a monster. He might have been racist and he might not have known how to drop people properly, but he wasn’t a monster.”

“You are defending him,” Loki stated frostily. “After what he did to you, you are defending him.”

Darcy was never one to back down, not ever. “I’m defending his race.”

“They are beasts.”

“They are people.”

Loki hated fighting with Darcy. They argued frequently, but it was rare that their words had any true bite.

He didn’t want Darcy to sympathize with Frost Giants. He especially didn’t want Darcy sympathizing with them after one had beat her. No doubt she would have been in pain until he healed her. But Loki could not change her mind and she could not change his.

“Darcy, please, let us discuss this later,” Loki pleaded holding her a bit tighter. He had almost lost Darcy Lewis and he wasn’t eager to have her pull away from him.
Darcy sighed, shaking her head. “Fine. But you didn’t have to kill him. You could have changed his memories or something.”

“We have already come to the conclusion that it is immoral to disturb people’s minds.” Loki reminded. It was true. To some degree, Loki thought it better to kill than play with the mind of another. Thoughts were what made people themselves, and after they had been changed…well…could they still consider themselves their own person?

Darcy frowned. “But was killing him the answer?”

“It was an option,” Loki responded darkly. “And at the time, it appeared to be the best one we had. Thor would have killed him in a far more painful manner if I had not slit his throat first.”

Her frown deepened and Loki did not like how it looked on her face. “You say that like it was a good thing you killed him.”

“I showed him mercy.”

“You killed him.”

Loki wanted this to end. But he also did not want Darcy to think he was cruel for killing Thrymr. Was he cruel? He had been raised and taught to kill things. While he did not enjoy slaughter as Thor did, he was not bothered by it. “I did kill him. But I had reason to, Darcy. He hurt you, his knowledge of our presence endangered Asgard, and he wished to be wed to my mother!”

Darcy made a face. “Yeah, that last one is pretty bad. He was going on about consummation before I left. Still…he wasn’t going to kill us.”

Loki kneaded his brow, keeping one arm firmly around Darcy. “I know.”

They were silent for a long moment before Loki spoke again.

“Would it have been better?”

Darcy quirked her brows at him in curiosity. “Better if what?”

He pressed his thumb to the worried line on her forehead. “Would it have been better if he had been trying to kill us?”

Her lips pouted and she nodded. “Yeah. It would have been.”

Loki gave her a scrutinizing expression. “That is not all, is it?”

She shook her head and Loki deeply hoped that those tears in her eyes would not spill over. Being responsible for Darcy Lewis’ sadness was a burden he wasn’t sure he could bear. “Would you have felt this way about killing him if he wasn’t a Frost Giant? What if he was an Aesir?”

“If he was an Aesir, we would not have been in this situation.”

“You know what I mean,” she sniffed and Loki’s gut churned.

He took a shaky breath. He would not lie to Darcy. He would give her the truth she deserved. “I would have felt more guilt if he were of another, less monstrous race.” Releasing her, he took a step back. “Does that answer your question?”

One of the tears spilled over when she nodded and she reached for him again. It confused Loki.
How he could hurt her thus and she still desired closeness with him? Though, he believed, if Darcy Lewis ever did anything he sorely disapproved of, he would still wish to be close to her.

“I am sorry I upset you,” Loki apologized sincerely. He felt like crying himself as he nuzzled her hair, reminding himself of why he must protect her. She was so compassionate. How could a person with such an extraordinary mind still have room to care so much for the universe? To care for him even when he upset her?

She rested her head on his chest, pressing her cold face against his neck. “I’m okay. Just…” she let a heavy breath go through puffed cheeks. “…let’s not talk about death anymore.”

Loki stroked her hair, agreeing without a second thought.

He would ponder what he’d done. As a male one Asgard, he was raised believing that he was to one day kill. One does not accept immortality without, at some point, going to war. Asgardians prided themselves on war and killing, fights and battles, skirmishes and brawls…

But Darcy’s world was different.

Midgard had war and fighting, but they did not glorify it. They were also not as singular a community as Asgard was. They were more like the Vanir, who fought with themselves more so than not. Yet the Vanir were of the same breed of culture. From what Loki had learned of Midgard, the overall diversity of their tiny realm was unparalleled.

Loki believed that it was due to their life spans. Mortal lives were so short that killing off one another was somehow crueler. To take away what little life they had to live was cruel.

Darcy’s mentality reflected that of her realm, yet there was more. There was always more with Darcy.

He believed, from the way she talked about life and the way she defended even the monsters of Jotunheim, that living things had the right to live. And Loki could not argue with that. He did, however, believe that living things also had the right to die.

He brought their differences in opinion down to cultural disparity. He hoped to one day overcome the gap between them. Fighting with Darcy made his heart ache.

Fenrir and Jörmungandr started making noises and Darcy peered down the tunnel, her face lighting up. “The Tesseract! Loki! We’re almost to the Heart of Jotunheim!”

Loki’s mind leapt at the opportunity to forget their morbid conversation. “Indeed we are. It is only a mile now. I can teleport us there, though we must be very cautious. I doubt anyone will be in the Heart, yet we can never be too sure…”

Darcy waved him off, tucking herself into his side and beckoning for Fenrir and Jörmungandr to come as well. “Yeah. We’ll figure it out when he get there. We’ve come too far now!” she cackled manically.

Loki smirked, genuinely pleased that the tension from their discussion had dissipated. “Indeed. We should not teleport within 300 meters of the exit. I will take us as far as I can and from there, we will search for a weak spot in the ice where the Heart of this blasted place lies.”

Darcy clapped him on the shoulder, lifting her chin and pulling back her shoulders in a poor imitation of Thor. “Come now, Loki! You take things far too seriously!”
Having seen too much of his brothers carefree and uncautious behavior that day, Loki sneered, taking his friend's hand. “Darcy, if you do that again, I am leaving you on Jotunheim.”

Sticking her tongue out, she squeezed his fingers, leaning into his side. “Yeah right. You just had a bilgesnipe over the thought of me being hurt. Don’t lie to me, boy!”

Her tone was light and her shoulders were free of their earlier stress. Yet, in that moment, he realized the sheer amount of control Darcy Lewis had in his life. A part of him wanted to smother that. A part of him wanted to take her back to Midgard and cast a memory spell so powerful that she couldn’t even remember the color of his eyes. But at the same time, he could not give her up for anything. He would rather slaughter all the giants on Jotunheim than leave her without promise of seeing her again.

Loki pressed his lips together as Jormungandr and Fenrir huddled in closer.

“I could never lie to you.” He responded to her statement in a mere whisper, perhaps too quiet for her to truly hear. He said them nonetheless and in the next second, they were gone in a flash of green light.

Chapter End Notes

AGHHHHH!
*BOOM* *CLANG* *CLASH*

Woah. Sorry about that.
That was, like, a really long time in the making. Like...a looooooooooong time.
Aaaanyways, just a few notes here.

In the myth, Thrymr the giant asks for Freya. But Frigga is Thor's mom in this story, so I bent the myth/comic a bit. Whoopsie! I think it worked out alright!

Also, Loki.
This gif has no purpose but to make me happy. And...well...delicious. Someone tell me I'm not alone in adoration for this gif.

So, in the movie it is quite clear that Loki, when he discovers his heritage, believes himself to be a monster. Odin is clearly a racist and has taught even his Frost Giant son to be racist as well yada yada yada...

BUT, in this chapter I really wanted to bring out how set Loki is on believing that Jotunns are monsters. He is willing to fight with Darcy about it and he feels entirely justified in killing them. It's darker than my usual fluffiness and crackiness, but also necessary for progression of this story I think.

Also, Loki doesn't turn into a Frost Giant when he touches Thrymr. It was supposed to be that way. I'll explain later when, ya know, plot comes in.

One last thing;
The tunnel. I'm going to explain it because I feel like there might be some confusion. The throne room of Laufey's Palace is supposedly right above the heart of Jotunheim. The Heart of Jotunheim is this special cave/chamber that's super cold where the Jotunns store valuable things. Odin supposedly used the tunnel to get into the throne room and take down Laufey. Loki and Darcy believe that they can divert the path down into the Heart.

Okay, I lied. One more thing:
O0Odin has not yet cast the spell to make Mjolnir accessible by the worthy. So, at the moment, everyone can lift Mjolnir.

phew. Okay, if you have any questions, feel free to hit me up.
Thank you everyone for your support and comments and everything and I just want
you guys to know that it means so much to me!
Frigga stared contemplatively at her scrying pool, skirting her finger over the surface and causing tiny waves to ripple over the blurry image that floated there.

It was not uncommon for the future to be unclear as it was today, especially when that which she wished to predict was influenced so heavily by her own decisions.

And Queen Frigga was quite indecisive that day.

She knew the first day after Loki had been to Midgard that Darcy Lewis was going to be a part of his life. Yet, the Allmother had not dreamed of the influence the young Midgardian would have.

Darcy Lewis had already proved she was clever. She had proved that within the first week of meeting Loki. She showed that she was a quick learner and an easy liar. She managed her strength wisely and fought with as much bravery as any Aesir. Perhaps even more.

Then there was her charm.

Not only was she social, but she had become the highlight of great feasts with her frequent smiles and sharp tongue. Whether at supper or a council meeting she and Loki could charm the wits out of any who sat still long enough.

Darcy was unquestionably devoted to Loki and had gained his loyalty to her in kind. Frigga rubbed her brow, unable to hold back the small smile that pushed at her lips. Their relationship was so touching at times. It never bothered Darcy that she was a mortal. She had only ever questioned herself once and after Loki had settled her insecurities, she never once believed that she did not have the power to protect him.

The Allmother stirred the water with her fingertips.

Darcy Lewis’ accomplishments were already forming a nice list in the Queen’s mind.
She had settled a dispute with King Surtur of Muspelheim, allowing Asgard to gain an impossible ally and also coming across a species long-thought to be extinct in the process. During her time on Nornheim, Darcy outsmarted Lord Bjarte; therefore she gained power over Nornheim’s most influential figure. She had assisted Loki through council meetings, taming the blind members of the court’s lust for war.

Not to mention, her pets were two of the strangest, most magical animals in Yggdrasil.

Whether the animals knew that or had any care was entirely unknown however.

Still, Queen Frigga had not completely considered the Midgardian for this position until now.

There was something she needed to know that Darcy possessed before allowing her further into Asgardian Politics.

That something was a trait that Odin refused to acknowledge ever existed. It was a necessity that he beat out of his sons as soon as they were big enough to handle daggers. It was something that even Loki was proving unable to show.

It was compassion for the enemy. It was mercy. It was knowing when it is better to let your enemy live and when to let them die.

The instant that Frigga made up her mind on what to do about Darcy Lewis, the frothy musk shadowing her pool dissipated and she was left with the future image of Darcy and Loki standing in Asgard’s treasure room before the Casket of Ancient Winters.

She pursed her lips disapprovingly at the reflection. She was going to need a nice glass of wine before those two returned to Asgard.

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Darcy figured the Heart of Jotunheim would be a bit more colorful.

She thought that maybe the Jotunns would get bored of the plain old blue-gray-darkness color scheme and go for something a bit more lively.

She was wrong.

Really, the Heart of Jotunheim was a smooth icy spot in the ground with nothing inside it but magical residue.

Odin’s tunnel had diverged into two paths and Loki quickly decided the one to their left was the way to the Heart. They walked downhill for a ways, magically broke through a wall of ice and arrived promptly inside the disappointment that was the Heart of Jotunheim.

Well, Darcy couldn’t say ‘disappointment’. The magical deposit in the room was shockingly strong. It prickled at her skin and made her frozen arm-hairs stand on end.

She watched Loki carefully as he paced the room, feeling along the walls.

“What are you getting?” she asked quietly, gently touching the wall beside her.

Loki’s brow was furrowed as he stepped to the center of the room and smiled. “Something was here.” He grinned a little wider. “This is it! Darcy it was here!”

“The Tesseract?!” she exclaimed, bouncing to his side and looking to the ceiling. “How do you
He took her hands in his, gazing upward at the high ceiling. “Darcy, our coordinates! We are some thousand feet below where the Casket of Ancient Winters would have sat on Jotunheim. Remember the journal of High Lord Tyr?”

“…and I watched, disarmed and bleeding from my battle with Laufey, his icy dagger in body, a towering pillar above his palace. An icy torch, lit by the monsters themselves…” Darcy quoted sullenly. “And our coordinates are the same?”

Loki’s fingers tingled a bit in Darcy’s hands. “Yes. I believe we are.”

Darcy’s mind raced. If the Tesseract had been here…

“…it would have acted as a power source. It could have used the spatial difference and combating magical tension to increase the power of the Casket.” Darcy thought aloud, releasing one of her hands from Loki’s grasp to tap her chin. “Laufey must have known that.”

Loki’s fingers tingled again, though the feeling was sharper this time as he subconsciously let his magic flow. “I can feel it Darcy…an artifact more powerful than any I’ve ever come across used to sit right under where we stand now. I have no doubts that Laufey would have been aware of that. I would hesitate to believe he would have taken the Tesseract away from Jotunheim.”

Darcy examined the empty frozen chamber. “Loki, if the Tesseract was here, and Odin broke in—”

“That would explain why Odin had to tunnel his way into Laufey’s palace,” Loki muttered, his eyes widening at the realization. “It took years to drive the Jotunns back into their own land and still it is said the battles on Jotunheim were the bloodiest there ever were. Odin wouldn’t have been able to get close enough to the Casket of Ancient Winters without taking the Tesseract first.”

Darcy squeezed Loki’s hand. “Yes, but Loki this doesn’t make any sense.”

His green eyes turned to her in shock. “It makes perfect sense.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she sassed, her pouty lips twisting into a smirk. “If Odin came here to get the Tesseract, wouldn’t he have taken it back to Asgard along with the Casket?”

Loki blinked a couple times, dumbfounded. “Yes. Who is to say that the Tesseract is not on Asgard?”

“Loki, we’ve checked Asgard! The map—“

“Darcy, all of the facts are pointing towards Asgard! Where else would Odin put it?” Loki argued hotly.

Darcy crossed her arms. “I think Odin would be smarter than to put it on Asgard, especially after he just won a war. He would have hidden it somewhere.”

“Yes! Somewhere on Asgard!” Loki insisted, “I do not think that the Allfather would have enough faith in any other realm to hold it for him. What race would be simple enough to hide a power source and not use it?”

“I don’t know, Loki,” she grumbled, “Maybe he didn’t tell them about it.”

“They would have been able to feel it.”
“Not if they were mortal.”

Loki was silenced for a moment and Darcy cocked her brow at him triumphantly. “You have to admit, Lokes, it’s a possibility.”

“Darcy…” he stared down at her, unsure, “I do not think Odin would trust Midgardians enough to leave it with them.”

Darcy beamed, her smile getting wider. “No, Loki, you were right! It does make sense!” she exclaimed, pacing the room as he had before. “Look, Odin figures out that somehow the Jotunns got the Tesseract and he can’t get close enough to the palace full on. So, he digs a channel that will simultaneously get him the Tesseract and a way into Laufey’s palace. He weakens the enemy’s defense, fights his way to Laufey, disarms him and takes the Casket!” Darcy worked out, Frank and Fenrir following her around in tight, dizzying circles.

“He stole the Casket and the Tesseract from Jotunheim. That’s pretty dangerous to steal two of your enemy’s most valuable things from them in one day. No doubt Laufey would try to get them back eventually. It would be super dangerous to have both the Tesseract and the Cask of Ancient Winters stored on Asgard. So what does Odin do?” Darcy prompts a now smirking Loki.

He relented, crossing his arms. “He waits until it is once again safe to travel down to Midgard, former land of the simplest peoples in the Nine Realms, and hides it there until needed.”

Darcy snapped her fingers. “Bingo! Now all we need is proof from our friend, The Map!”

She pulled the paper from her pocket and began opening it up when they heard a rumbling from somewhere outside the chamber. Darcy gasped, shoving the map back into her pocket. Her gaze flicked to the hole in the wall where they emerged from. It would be difficult to climb back out of and teleporting back into the tunnel was risky to say the least. “Loki?”

He pressed a finger to his lips, using his other arm to pull her close. Over his shoulder, Darcy saw the passage into Odin’s chamber freeze over, the gaping hole becoming part of the wall once more. “I think there is a portal in here, Darcy. I do not know if it connects to Asgard, but it is far safer than our alternative routes.”

Outside, the noises got louder and the gravelly tones of the Jotunar sounded through the ice. Darcy gripped onto his armor, holding herself against his chest. The sooner they got out, the better. She didn’t want Loki to kill anyone else that day. “Frank! Fen!”

The animals hurried forwards, reaching their masters’ sides just in time for the four of them to disappear in a shimmer of rainbow light.

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Darcy relaxed once she felt the air around them heat and the rapid thrumming of Loki’s heart reduced to its normal, steady pace. His arms were still wrapped tightly around her shoulders and Darcy was perfectly happy to wait right there until he gave her the ‘OK’.

“Darcy? Are you alright?” Loki asked, his cheek pressed against the side of her head and his chilly fingers stroking her hair.

“Yeah,” Darcy sighed, pulling back a little to make sure all of him was there, “Where are we?”

Loki glanced around the room and let out a short chuckle. “We are in the Palace’s Treasure Room.”
“Really?” Darcy asked excitedly, poking her head out from Loki’s embrace to see the foretold room of treasures. Entry was permitted only to members of the royal family by the two guards always present outside the door.

In other words, Darcy had never gotten to see it.

The room itself was much like any other room on Asgard. It was gold, pillared and elegant. On different pedestals around the room, divided into separate alcoves, were the precious artifacts of Asgard. Darcy could not say what all of them were or what they meant, but she could tell that there was a reason they were locked up.

Where some might see the Treasure Room as a glorified trophy cupboard, Darcy saw the truth. It was a cell for all of Asgard’s precious loot.

And like all great cells, it had a guard.

Darcy turned to face the end of the room where, as expected, the Casket of Ancient Winters sat. Behind it was a sort of stone grate that radiated magical power. The entire room made Darcy’s skin prickle. “The Destroyer.”

Loki moved to stand beside his friend and Darcy absentmindedly reached out to take his hand while he explained. “It is a strange bit of magic. Baldr and Odin forged it together. It abides by Gungnir and acts as a conduit for whoever holds the power to control it.”

Darcy hummed in response. She had read all about The Destroyer. There was a small bit of controversy about it when Odin first introduced the idea of a magical weapon taking charge of such a large responsibility. Though, as usual, it was just an argument from the Norns that was pushed aside with the Allfather’s word.

Darcy checked around the room, stifling her urge to inspect each of the different artifacts in favor of directing her focus onto the Casket of Ancient Winters.

It was beautiful, in a way. Powerful. Cold. Mysterious. But it was also very simple. It was the symbol of a race and the pride of their culture. It was what kept the Jotunns secure.

And now, the Frost Giants sit in the decaying cities of Jotunheim while their tool to rebuild rests unused in an Asgardian chamber, collecting dust.

It made Darcy sad to think of the frozen Heart of Jotunheim compared to Asgard’s Treasure Room. One, barren and empty, a mere shadow of the potential it once held, all of its glory stolen by another realm, never to be returned.

Sadly she leaned against Loki while Frank experimentally poked the tip of his tail through the grates of the Destroyer’s section.

“Jörmungandr, stop that,” Loki scolded, “You will lose your tail and I will not grow it back for you.”

Frank instantly recoiled from the grate, sheepishly slithering behind Fenrir.

Darcy bumped Loki’s arm with her shoulder. “Don’t be mean about it. He was just playing.”

“He was going to get hurt, Darcy. If I am too nice, he will only go back and do it again,” Loki persisted, letting go of her hand to wrap an arm around her shoulders.
Darcy clicked her tongue, leaning against his side, “Okay, fine.”

They shared another moment, staring at the Casket, watching the blue light send patterns across the ground. She looked up at Loki and knew that he was thinking of its mechanics and magical components. “Let’s study the map tonight. I bet we can find out where the Tesseract is on Midgard and maybe even where it was before the Jotunns got it.”

Loki ran a hand through his hair. “I do not think we will be able to find the Tesseract on the map if it is on Midgard.”

“Why not?” Darcy queried, reaching into her pocket once more to look at them map.

Loki scrutinized the Midgardian section, pointing to the miniscule letters and words that jumbled together into nonsense. “Darcy, we went over this before. Too many early languages were reminiscent of Allspeak. It is an all encompassing language and every Midgardian dialect has some inflection of it. We would have a better chance of finding it on Midgard if we knew exactly when Odin brought it down. Midgardians changed their languages frequently as time progressed. The time period that it was placed would give us a greater indication as to where it was.”

Darcy shook her head, “But, Loki, we can’t figure that out. The only person who would know if Odin put it there is Odin. Or your mother…”

“And neither of them are likely to help in our endeavors,” Loki sighed, watching the Casket pulse with energy once more. “My mother has already helped us far too much and we are working with a hypothesis, Darcy, a hunch that Odin brought it to Midgard. We have no verifiable proof.”

“So what do you suggest we do?” Darcy asked sarcastically, tilting her chin to stare up into Loki’s pretty green eyes.

He looked down at her dignified face and dared a small smirk. “I suggest we do the best we can.”

They glared affectionately at one another until a clear, casual voice spoke from the chamber doors. “Odin, and both his father and grandfather before him, proclaimed that this room was restricted to any citizen of Asgard who was not in the royal family.”

Loki and Darcy whipped around to see none other than Frigga Allmother, standing casually on the stairs, her hands folded elegantly in front of her.

Darcy had the strong urge to tell the Queen that she was not, in fact, a citizen of Asgard. But she was still uncertain as to if the Queen knew of her Midgardian origins or not.

“Mother,” Loki addressed her more formally than usual, “Forgive me. It was my doing to bring Lady Darcy into the Treasure Room; may any punishment that should befit this crime fall upon me instead.”

Darcy gave him a withering look, prepared to smack some sense into that pretty head of his when she caught Queen Frigga giving him the tiniest of eye rolls. “That will not be necessary. I am neither Odin nor his father nor his grandfather. Therefore, I will not enforce their rules.”

Loki looked up, unsurprised, but immensely appreciative. “Thank you, Mother. We shall take our leave.”

Frigga smiled delicately, secrets churning in her eyes. “Yes. Loki, the Allfather has called a small meeting that you must attend. He has forbidden anyone outside the court from attending.”
Darcy’s heart sunk at her words. Every so often, Odin Allfather would declare a meeting that she was not permitted to be a part of. It was very disappointing and since Darcy was not even an Asgardian, there was no way for her to become part of the council unless she did some noble deed and got dubbed worthy by the Allfather.

And that would never happen.

Loki frowned, giving Darcy’s hand a light squeeze. “I shall be off then.”

Frigga seemed to sense both Darcy and Loki’s discontent and she slowly walked down the stairs to where they stood, placing a hand on Loki’s shoulder to halt his departure. “Loki, Darling?”

“Yes Mother?” he returned a hint of confusion in his tone. Darcy thought it was funny when Loki got confused. He got so frustrated with himself for not understanding what was going on and it caused his forehead to dimple in the cutest way.

“Have you considered asking the Lady Darcy to be a part of the council?” Frigga asked him politely, though Darcy saw something else stirring.

Loki’s brow furrowed. “I cannot grant her that. Only the Allfather——“

“No, not a member of the council. I did not suggest you make her Lord of this city or that, bearer of what land and so forth. I asked if you had made her a part of the council in the only way you can as of now.” Frigga tried again, waiting for Loki to catch on.

It didn’t take long, and Loki shook his head. “I believed that I was too young to install such a position into my services.”

Loki might have understood, but Darcy sure didn’t. She found that a bit embarrassing. She knew a great deal about Asgardian politics. What was this position they were talking about?

Frigga shook her head. “No. Not at all. It is uncommon because most your age do not take on the responsibilities you have; but by all means, you are entitled.”

Darcy held up her hands. “Excuse me, Your Highness, but what position are you guys talking about?”

The Queen raised an elegant brow before turning a look to her son. “Loki?”

He spoke offhandedly, making it apparent that his mind was already scoping out the possibilities. “You would be to me what Queen Frigga is to the Allfather.”

Darcy’s eyes widened and she stared blankly at the two royals. “Uh, Loki? I don’t think Sigyn would be very happy if we got married. And, you know, she’s my friend and I wouldn’t want to——“

Loki shook his head, his face bright red while Frigga looked to be stifling laughter. “Darcy! That was not a marriage proposal! My Mother holds the position of Advisor to King Odin.”

“Oh.” That cleared a great deal up for Darcy. Though, she still did not know what an advisor entailed completely.

As far as she knew, an advisor acted as a less powerful extension of the royal individual they served. Their word was accepted in other realms as the word of the royal for whom they worked.

Many members of the royal family chose not to have advisors. Having one demanded that you
communicate with them almost constantly. They must always know the royal member’s opinion and must be able to convey it through their own actions. From journals she read of the few advisors that existed, the job requires a lot of trust and even greater dedication.

Darcy wondered why Frigga would be advisor to Odin when she was already Queen. She had her own duties, did she not? Darcy pressed her lips together in thought. Now that she considered it, she didn’t really know what Frigga did. As Queen, she was not required to attend any meeting she did not want to partake in and many of her other responsibilities consisted of communicating with the public and interaction at social affairs.

Darcy looked to Asgard’s Queen and came to the revelation that she did not actually know what Frigga did most of the time.

Loki noticed Darcy’s hesitancy and explained as best he could. “It is not a very popular position. It is taxing. The description is actually quite vague except that it is very involved work.”

Frigga’s expression had grown serious as she watched Loki’s brain sort through the potential of Darcy as his advisor. “My son, I am afraid you will be late for your meeting at this point. Go on. I will talk with Lady Darcy, yes?”

“Of course, Mother,” he said shortly, looking to Darcy like he wanted to say something, but changing his mind due to the presence of his mother.

Frigga waited until he was gone before gesturing up the stairs to Darcy. “Shall we?”

The Midgardian gave a curt nod, holding the pummels of her swords as she walked up the stairs. Frigga started talking once they were on ground level which was only about thirty staircases later. Darcy thought that with such advanced technology, Asgardians could have at least installed an elevator. But, nope. Darcy Lewis, mortal, had to walk up five hundred thousand stairs in her heavy leather armor, trying not to breathe too heavily because that would be embarrassing.

Frank and Fenrir did not have any trouble with the stairs and Darcy figured they had followed her in favor of sitting through any boring meetings with Loki. They preferred more vigorous activities.

Once they had reached a floor that wasn’t servants chambers or washrooms, Frigga began to speak. “You are clever, Lady Darcy. Very much so. But you are also impulsive. I understand that you are young and in youth, we tend not to think before we act.”

She opened her mouth to protest that she was not impulsive when Frigga kept talking. “For example, if I were of a weaker race and I had no magic nor strength to combat my enemy, I would use my wit to escape their grasp rather than my spit,” the Queen said breezily and Darcy’s face reddened. Frigga knew she was a Midgardian then. She also knew that she had been on Jotunheim.

Darcy bowed her head. “My apologies, Your Highness.”

Frigga shook her head. “You have already apologized to Loki and he is the one who needed it. Even so, this is not a matter that needs to be apologized for. It need only be a lesson to learn from.”

Darcy nodded in agreement, falling in step beside the Queen of Asgard. She was a tall woman. Imposing, but beautiful, strong, but kind. Her words were soft and carried meaning. Darcy, in some ways, was scared of Frigga. Yet, at the same time, she wished to throw her arms around the Queen and have a cuddle. She seemed like the cuddling type.
They continued walking the length of the corridor and Darcy realized she had no idea where they were going. She knew most of the palace, but she still hadn’t had the time to explore it properly.

“Your Highness?” Darcy asked as they walked.

“Yes, Lady Darcy?”

Darcy hesitated, “What does an advisor do exactly? I mean, I want to help Loki out as much as I can and stuff, but what if I can’t? We already talk a lot and if anyone was going to be Loki’s advisor, I think I could do a really great job. But I also don’t agree with Loki on some stuff and I don’t want to go promoting all those things I don’t believe around Yggdrasil, you know? And—“

Frigga held up a hand to silence the young girl’s rambling, a humored little smirk on her face. “Darcy, there is more to being an advisor than that.”

They were now stopped in front of a door. Though unlike most ornate gold entrances, this one was simpler and carved from wood. It looked old and full of secrets. Frigga’s fingertips glowed with magic as she pushed down on the handle to let them into the chamber.

Darcy entered slowly, gasping at what she saw.

It was a beautiful room. The ceiling was high and vaulted with warm colored tapestries draped around the pillars. The walls were decorated with tapestries so intricate that Darcy could have spent years staring at them and still not see all that had been woven. The far wall of the room, across from where Darcy stood in the entryway, was a window revealing the Capital city of Asgard. Plush seating framed the view and worked as the sill.

Though, the most captivating feature of the room was a heavy stone basin, centered in the middle of the room. It was wide and there were small pillows and cushions around it so that one might sit beside the water. Waterfalls fell from the ceiling into the ornate pool, rippling the clear water.

Darcy dared a glance at the Queen. “And what more is there to being an advisor than simply advising?”

Frigga smiled kindly, offering Darcy her hand and leading them around the pool where the water was so clear that Darcy could see her reflection, to the window where they sat. “Tea?” she asked, holding up a teapot that Darcy was sure had not been there before.

“Please,” she replied, taking the steaming cup without milk or sugar. Loki, given the option, usually preferred hot chocolate to tea. He did not like the idea of using caffeine to stay up later. He would sooner stay up without the caffeine.

While Frigga poured her own tea, she began to speak light-heartedly, as though she were remembering a rather fond memory. “Odin and I met on the day I began my adolescence. I was neither a noblewoman’s daughter, nor anyone really. I was the daughter of an Asgardian handmaiden, brought up by Vanir nobles. An odd situation, but there you have it. They knew my mother and found that they liked me well enough not to let an orphaned child make it on their own.”

She took a sip of her tea, smiling over the rim while Darcy listened. “I was...a bit wild. Vanheim is not quite so strict on the higher class as Asgard. Children spend most of their days playing in the woods and tempting the will of the beasts that live there. I was among them of course. Yet, I was a bit different from the Vanir children. You see, the Vanir are not all proficient at magic. They do not fear it, like the Norns, but it is an uncommon occurrence. Pastry?”
Darcy accepted one of the rose pastries, thanking the queen and waiting eagerly for her to continue.

“I had a great affinity for magic. I could use it, bend it, mold it. I lacked the theory that they used in Asgard. Here, they teach it with words and spells and structure. But I learned by feeling it. It was dangerous to do so, but I learned my limits. When my Vanir family visited the Asgardian capital, I turned to my adolescence and I met Odin.

“He was so short!” Frigga giggled and Darcy could not help but snicker into her tea. “He was this boy with brown hair and more muscle than I’d ever seen on anyone. But, oh, he was at least a head shorter than I! I was still wild then, though I kept most of the playing for my tongue. He would come to speak with me and no sooner would he begin conversation, then I would end it with a witty remark of some sort. Needless to say, I liked him very much.”

Darcy didn’t bother to hide the face she made. Because…gross…Odin.

The Queen smiled at Darcy and continued her story. “I thought he was cute. He went through such lengths to court me and woo me and, I will admit, some of the attempts were quite awful. But, eventually, I accepted his offer for courtship.”

She sipped her tea, her blue eyes flashing in happy memory. “If you think Thor is neglectful of his duties, you should have seen Odin. He was a mess! He skipped all of his meetings at least twice a week to sneak me out into a long ship and fly us all over Asgard. It is how I got to know him so well. A few years after we became adults, Odin proposed and I accepted.”

“When did you become his advisor?” Darcy asked, holding out her tea cup for Frigga to refill.

“I am almost there, Darcy, one moment,” the Allmother chided, also refreshing her own cup. “Now, it was the day of our wedding and I was dressed to be the bride of Prince Odin. That very morning, Bor died.

“Unlike most kings, Bor never ate an apple. He chose to live and die in roughly five thousand years in order to feel some ‘sense of fulfillment’ I believe is what he said. Well, he did not fulfill the task of marrying Odin and I and on that morning; Odin and I were married, rather hastily, then coronated King and Queen of Asgard.

“I knew when I accepted Odin’s proposal that I would be Queen one day and I educated myself, no end. If I was going to rule a realm, I wanted to do it right. I spent all of my adolescence learning about the court and the people. I did everything in my power to learn the inner functions of the Asgardian world, much like yourself.”

Frigga set down her tea, replacing it with a bit of bread which she held warmly in her hands. “But Odin had never been one for politics. I could see it on that day that he became King that he was completely unprepared for the responsibilities. So, I told him that I would be his advisor.

“You see Darcy, the position of Queen offers free reign over what to do and what not to do. More or less, I am a glorified seat warmer who can idly stroll in and out meetings about this or that. So, the first thing I did was give up my throne. I have one. It is somewhere, just not beside Odin. The day I became Queen, I decided to openly reject the kind of publicity and pointless work a Queen was once known to do.

“Now, Bor did have an advisor, though he was an idiot. He had less brains than a bluebird. Nevertheless, he introduced me to what an advisor did, which consisted of dedicating your life to the King and learning his every opinion and habits so that you could preach truth to the public.”
Darcy frowned. “But Odin didn’t know anything.”

Frigga swallowed her bite of bread, picking up her tea once more. “Precisely. Odin knew nothing. I had to teach him which made me more of an educator than an advisor. However, through this process, I learned a great deal about more shady political works.

“Not a few years after Bor’s death, there was an assassination attempt on Odin at the Harvest Festival in Ringsfjord. Obviously the assassin failed as they were shot down by several archers. But you must have understood my shock. My new husband’s life was almost taken and would have left me the iconic throne and rule over Asgard. I could have done it, but I did not wish to at the time.”

Frigga stared out the window for a moment, then let her gaze drift back to Darcy. Her eyes seemed to analyze everything about her before she continued. “That day, I vowed to always have the upper hand. I would figure out a way in which to ensure the safety of the Nine Realms so that my occasionally simple minded husband would not suffer too greatly in ruling his realm. Though turning this dream into a reality was quite difficult, you see. A Queen could not do very much to help her kingdom in such a way that would not draw unwanted attention from the public. Hence, I sought to reevaluate my position as advisor.”

Darcy’s lips were pursed and her hands twitched in front of her, almost begging to take notes. “You changed your job description?”

Frigga nodded, the corners of her lips twitching upwards. “Yes. It was difficult. I was alone in my perusal. Bor’s advisor had moved on and was busy fulfilling his duties as some lord or another in Skornheim. I had nothing but servants, my own wits, and, of course, all the power anyone could ever want. I had the right to hold secrets, which is a luxury not all possess.

“I used my potential, I suppose. I trained with swords and knives until I could defeat my trainer. I spent countless hours in the libraries, researching political history and past feuds until I found something peculiar.”

Darcy leaned forwards as Frigga’s tale intensified.

“Now, keep in mind, tensions were starting to build between Asgard and Jotunheim and they were only heightened by the change in leaders. Thrymr was cast out for being too careless a king. It was true, and the Asgardian council was in an uproar over their new ruler, King Laufey. He was known to be cunning and dangerous and even magical at times. Though, Jotunn magic is quite different from that on Asgard. It develops differently…” Frigga trailed off knowingly, smirking a bit.

“Ah, well, that is beside the point. Jotunheim and Asgard were disputing and I was thinking back to a good friend of mine named Idun. Sweet girl, Idun is. She used to employ people to help her harvest apples, though she let go of most of them after incidents with overripe or underripe consumption of fruit. I never met any of her workers, though I knew of them. They worked for her long before Asgard and Jotunheim had any troubles whatsoever.

“This peculiar thing I found was in the Asgardian census. One of Idun’s staff had left prematurely to the rest of her workers. Her leave from Asgard was not marked anywhere in any books I could find. One year, she worked for Idun and the next, she was no longer an inhabitant on Asgard.”

Darcy stroked Fenrir’s back, feeding him a bit of pastry. “Wait, the Asgardian census only takes count every ten years, not every year. How did you know she left?”

Frigga poured another cup of tea for Frank. “Idun is allowed to produce apples and sell them for
whatever price she deems fit. The Crown has permitted her secrecy for thousands of years because it consents the capital power to maintain some control over who gets an apple. Conditions to Idun’s self-exile would be to document the details of her residence: How many apples she produced, any employment she offered, things of that nature.”

“So, this person who left...?” Darcy asked, her arms wrapped around Fenrir and her cheek resting on his head.

“She was never heard of again on Asgard. Though, in the next two years or so, there came word of a most strange occurrence on Jotunheim.” Frigga said as Frank made himself comfortable in her lap. “The newborn, Thrymr, who was destined one day to be King had grown immensely overnight. His entire being had become huge, even as a babe. It was proclaimed that he would be the largest Frost Giant there ever was with the exception of Ymir.”

Darcy blinked in awe for a moment and then looked down at her own animals. Loki had said something about them coming across some kind of magic and that the effects on them was similar to that of an apple. But he said they were fine and Darcy trusted him. She turned her attention to Frigga once more. “So Thrymr was so big because someone gave him an apple?”

Frigga quirked a crooked grin, one of her shoulders coming up in a shrug. “I suspected such. It was so long before my time and I was only glad that Asgard documents nearly everything. The important part of this tale is to remember how I came across this secret. I looked into it. I delved deeper. I found slight mishaps and odd ends in history and used them to find how it affects today.

“I expanded my services, Darcy. I discerned from my studies that I had the ability to further protect the crown and help the realm in ways that did not involve lifting a sword to the throat of mine enemy. Biding my time, I began to find people. Lost people, clever people, lonely people, who could help me. I would do enough research, but I had no direct proof of anything. I did not know for sure, I could only guess. Even so, some information could not even be ascertained through Asgard’s archives. I needed people to go find things out for me.

“I am a Queen. I cannot leave the realm whenever I please to go chase my superstitions and conspiracies. So the people I found would go and do it for me under my instruction. We would contact frequently, or sometimes more infrequently, by magic or by scrying pool.” She indicated to the ornate basin in the center of the room.

Darcy’s eyebrows shot up. “So…they’re like your spies? You run a super secret spy agency or something for Asgard? That’s what advisors do?”

Frigga smiled, “More or less. Though, the spying is not always for politics. Occasionally it is. I might send someone to Muspelheim to oversee the hatching of their dragons or to Svartalfheim to search for the ruins of a missing ship from the Dark Elf fleets that fell so many years ago.”

Darcy’s mind raced as she caught on to Frigga’s intentions. “You gave Loki and me that book, the one of the map. What about that? What did you want us to do with that?” she asked, her words tripping over each other as she rushed to get out her questions.

The Allmother stared at Darcy gravely. “I gave it to you because you asked to study interactions between Midgard and Asgard. Do not think I did not know what you meant. It was a tool. I suppose it was part of a test to see how well you could logic out something so simple but so very complex.”

Darcy’s brow knit together, “Loki and I got it though, didn’t we?”

The Queen’s lips pulled into a coy little smile. “Perhaps. Perhaps you are almost there. I cannot
Darcy wanted to leave it at that, but she just couldn’t. Frigga knew everything! Why couldn’t just tell her where everything was? “Why can’t you say? I mean, you know that we’re looking for this stuff, right? So, why not just say where it is?”

The Queen looked mildly humored, sipping her tea. “Believe it or not, Darcy, I do not know where the objects are that you seek. I very truly cannot say where they are. Though, it does seem to me like you have made good progress.”

The mortal gaped at the Allmother in disbelief. “You don’t know where they are?”

“No at all.”

Darcy struggled to get out her words. “Then why are we looking for them?!”

Frigga made a face as she reached the dregs of her drink. “I do not know. It is your wish to find them, so I encourage you to do so safely. Needless to say, the infinity stones need to be located.”

“So this is why you want me to be an advisor?” Darcy asked simply, “To find the infinity stones? To be one of your spies?”

Frigga shook her head, “No, no. Of course not. I want you to be an advisor because I think that you would be damn good at it, Darling. And I would not have you be a spy. That work is testy and you are a child. Besides, you are also interested in politics and you cannot be involved in those if you are off on another realm, counting turnip baskets from the Vanaheim harvest. As for finding infinity stones, you and Loki are doing fine by yourselves.”

Darcy considered this, running her fingers through Fenrir’s gray fur while he snoozed on her legs. “What would you want me to do? As Loki’s advisor?”

Frigga pursed her lips at Darcy’s consideration. “Well, firstly, you must hold up the pretense as to what an advisor does as seen by the public. Of course, it is not idle work. Loki did not lie when he told you it meant dedication. You will have separate meetings that you attend with both the General of the Einherjar, Asgard’s treasurer and distributer of goods. You must work with the marketers. Advisors, unlike royalty, do more work to stabilize economy. Loki will of course work with you and you will do as you both see fit for it as you are representing him. In these meetings, Darcy, you will have equal power with those you work with, sometimes even more.

“As for the rest, I would have you train with me on occasion. You would not be a spy, for I think your mind is a bit more tuned for what I do which is finding details. I will teach you to be a proper advisor. To know when someone is lying, to read a text and know by its inflections what era it was written in. Most importantly, you will learn attention to detail and how to see it without searching. It could be valuable, that is,”-she paused to stroke a sleeping Frank’s scaly back-“if you chose to accept the position.”

Darcy was, quite honestly, overwhelmed. The idea of finally having individual say in Asgard’s political dealings was an incredible prospect. And training with Frigga sounded like the coolest thing to ever happen to her. But there was one part that was keeping her from saying yes right away. She cleared her throat, shifting a bit in her seat. “How much dedication would it require?”

Frigga smiled kindly, taking Darcy’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze and Darcy noticed
that the Queen’s touch was very much like Loki’s, firm, strong, but also very gentle and caring. “It would be ideal for you to live in the capital. Coming into any position granted by that of a royal member implies that you drop your past titles. You would be Lady Darcy, Advisor to Loki. Or Advisor Darcy as you would be called in more casual settings.”

Her heart picked up tempo as Darcy thought about the potential of living on Asgard. She knew that if she was absolutely determined to leave, she could. She could leave home and her parents and her friends. They wouldn't even have to know where she had gone. But the thought of leaving them made her incredibly sad. It was hard to live with them at times when so much of her life involved a world they had no knowledge of, but it did not make her love them any less.

Even so, there was more to it than just her family.

It was true, living on Asgard would make Loki happy and it would be considerably more convenient. But aside from all the niceties, the prospect of living on Asgard would make her… Asgardian.

She wasn’t Asgardian at all. She was a mortal. A Midgardian. There was a time when she would have said yes. But that time wasn’t now. She had the goals of a Midgardian. She wanted to be educated in Midgardian politics. She wanted to change her own realm for the better.

Darcy had realized, one day after getting frustrated with all of her school things, that she had potential. Yes she was more help on Asgard as of now, but Midgard needed more help than Asgard. Midgard was behind the rest of the realms in almost every possible way. It was horrifying. Darcy wanted to change that and she feared that if she became too Asgardian, if she dropped all of her ties to her mortality, she would be unable help her race.

“Your Majesty…” Darcy said, her chest tightening, “I don’t think I can do it.”

Frigga moved a little closer, cupping Darcy’s cheek in her tender palm. “Darling child, I did not say you must live in the capital. I said it would be ideal. Both Loki and I will understand if you do not wish to live in the palace. However, it will mean a lot of traveling.”

Darcy nodded, running through the possibilities in her head. “But what about… you know… does it matter that I’m—“

Frigga silenced her with an oblivious stare. “What? That you are a person entirely capable of the job I have just offered you? Believe me Lady Darcy, if you had been anything less than that, you would not be here now.”

The girl blushed and her insides began to churn with excitement. “Okay, cool. So, if I agree to this, how much do I tell Loki?”

“As much as you see fit.”

“Will I ever do any actual advising? Because usually Loki knows what he’s doing…” Darcy thought back to Jotunheim. “Okay, sometimes he doesn’t. But, you know what I mean, right?”

Frigga patted the back of her hand. “Yes, I know what you mean. Advise Loki where he needs advice, but that is something you already do. I see no reason to alter your methods.”

Fenrir began kicking in his sleep which effectively woke him up. And whenever Fenrir woke up, Frank woke up as well.
“So, Lady Darcy, do you accept the position?” Queen Frigga asked, sitting up a little taller.

Darcy did so as well, trying to suppress the awesome smile that was threatening to overtake her face. “I accept.”

“Good,” Frigga confirmed, standing up, “We shall begin immediately.”

Darcy’s eyebrows shot into her hairline. “What?”

“Your first task,” Frigga continued, walking over to her basin and speaking as though Darcy had not spoken. “Is to find your way back to the Ladies’ Chambers, change into lighter attire for the evening meal and then find Loki. You two have much to discuss.”

The young mortal stood, her animals bounding to her sides as she bowed. “Thank you, Allmother.”

The Queen gave her a humored expression. “Oh, off with you now.”

Smiling, Darcy turned on her heel, prepared to leave when she was called to once more. “And Lady Darcy?”

“Yes?”

Frigga smirked, looking down at Frank and Fenrir, “Keep these two out of the kitchens. A couple weeks ago they nearly ate an entire raw bilgesnipe and half a griffin.”

Darcy scowled down at her troublesome friends who stared happily back at her with wide, innocent eyes. “Sorry, Allmother, they won’t do it again.”

“Don’t make promises that won’t be kept.” Frigga chided as her final dismissal to Lady Darcy, Advisor to Prince Loki.

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Later that evening, Odin stood in his quarters, leering down at his smug wife.

Oh, she was a tricky one. Why, by the gods, did he have to love a tricky one?

Her smile deepened and Odin knew why. It was because she was brilliant and a damn good woman. And he loved her, even if, at the moment, he was considering taking Gungnir and blasting that crooked grin from her face.

“Who is she? You told me before that you had it under control and now Loki has taken her as his advisor!” he demanded and Frigga lifted her palms helplessly.

“She is Lady Darcy, Advisor to Prince Loki,” she answered him smartly.

A vein on Odin’s forehead pulsed almost painfully. “Frigga, I do not know what you are playing at —”

“I am playing at nothing, you old fool,” she interrupted, crossing her ankles and giving her husband a stern look. “She has been a part of nearly every important council meeting as of late. She pays attention and she cares about Asgard. I made the suggestion to Loki and he readily propositioned Lady Darcy to be his advisor. After the position was explained to her, she agreed.”

Odin wanted to argue. He was not an idiot. He knew that Frigga always did more than she let on. As she was his advisor, he had some insight to the prospect that there was more to her work than
she would ever tell him. This was of some concern when his blasted Queen and son insisted on bringing tiny little girls with no titles in from gods know where to be Loki’s advisor.

It would be easier to dispute Frigga’s cause if Lady Darcy had not been so well liked. Even Odin had to admit that she was charming and had quite a sharp tongue. Even so, he did not trust her. She was too close to Loki and her origins were still unknown.

Where on Asgard was she from?

“Let it go, Odin. As I said before, I shall sort it accordingly.”

The Allfather nearly snapped, “Sort it accordingly? Perhaps you should sort it the same way you sorted their trip to Jotunheim!”

Her eyebrows shot up in a way that meant Odin would soon eat his words. “Oh? Did Thor tell you?”

“Yes. I threatened to have his mouth sewn shut,” he grumbled. “He has said that girl and Loki and himself went gallivanting around on Jotunheim in search of a fight. He said they were looking for practice.”

Frigga’s eyes flashed and Odin wasn’t quite sure what that meant. “Well, you are a grown man, Allfather. I expect you to be perfectly willing to accept the consequences of your actions.”

“‘The consequences of my actions’?” Odin scoffed, “My love, they could have started a war!”

“Yes, that they could have,” Frigga agreed. “But, then again, what have you taught them? ‘Glory goes to bringers of death to these foul beasts.’” she quoted. “As I recall, that was your speech to your forces when the fight was brought to Nidavellir. Since then, I have only heard variations of the same thing.”

“You are saying,” Odin growled, “that their actions are faults of mine?”

Frigga was no longer grinning and her glare was poisonous. “Exactly. Now you are catching on. I do wish this had happened sooner.”

“Frigga, this is no time to jest! If they are ever to become great kings—“

“I jest not, Odin, about the safety of the Nine Realms or more importantly, our sons,” she snapped, getting to her feet. “But you are the current King of Asgard. You are setting an example for how they should rule should either of them lead a realm. It is not my place to teach them how to be kings. I would rather they be good men than great kings,” she told him, shoulders squared. “If you do not wish them to go and attack their enemies, try then, to teach them a little compassion. And if you cannot do that, I suppose they will just have to find it in short little ladies whom they make their advisors.”

“Frigga—“ Odin tried again, this time with a softness that had not been there before.

“No more of your excuses, Odin,” she said, taking his hand. “Your time for educating them has run short.”

He nodded, considering Thor’s explanation of their adventure. “Frigga?”

“Yes?”
“Is it true that Thor and Loki felled a Frost Giant?” he inquired hesitantly.

Her lips tightened and Odin knew he was stepping on thin ice. “Perhaps. Why?”

He cleared his throat, “It is no small feat to take down a Frost Giant.”

The Allmother glared at him with such disapproval that Odin considered hiding behind Gungnir. “Yes. At the very least, your lessons on how to kill a Frost Giant have gotten through.”

Her bitterness froze the King’s tongue so he was not quite sure what to say at all. Thankfully, she spoke before he could manage any justification for his admiration.

“Take to bed, Odin. Think on what I have told you. Really, I think we could have waited at least another thousand years before having children,” Frigga sighed thoughtfully.

Odin cleared his throat. “We had one child.”

“No,” Frigga corrected, “I birthed one child. We have two. And they are hardly children anymore. Soon they will be men,” she finished with finality, glaring at Odin, daring him to tell her otherwise.

“You challenge me, wife? Even here in my own bed chamber?” The Allfather grumbled, relenting and sauntering off in the direction of his bed.

“Where else would I insinuate a challenge?” Frigga smirked, waving a hand to dim the lights. “Sleep well, old man. I have business to attend to this evening concerning a certain pile of stones on a distant realm which is also of consequence to you.”

And with that, she left, leaving The Allfather more confused than ever he was.

Chapter End Notes

Okay. So, Frigga totally just made a dirty joke right there. Good job Frigga.

When I started this fic, I had this idea of Frigga being an absolute badass mostly just because of how sassy she was in Thor 2. She was so sassy and she was everyone’s
favorite Mom and she was the only one who Loki still cared about. Naturally, this bitch is the shit. Hence, I set out to write her as such. Which is where the idea of an almost 'Asgardian Secret Government Agency' type thing. It's like SHIELD except smaller and it's run by Frigga. Which means it's cooler.

I have to thank people for making this chapter actually possible! First of all, my beta esmejasper. Caz is pretty spectacular. AbaloneTimebomb helped me out a lot in the positive encouragement department. I was freaking out that this chapter was going to bust and that the idea was weird, but she assured me that it would be okay. Then a big shout out to Tori Crash who brought something to light that I really needed to think about which was Darcy's need to stay on Midgard. She made me realize that my initial reasoning for Darcy's attachment to her home realm was a bit weak and so I tweaked it. I dwelled on it for a while and then continued dwelling on it until I came up with something I deemed solid enough.

In this chapter, Frigga pretty much says 'Dude, you could live on Asgard' and Darcy freaks out a bit because she isn't Asgardian and she doesn't want to lose the influence she would have on her own realm.

Anyways, thank you everyone for all of the everything! I can't tell you enough how much the kudos and comments and bookmarks mean to me and I'm still kind of flattered and everything that you read my fic and...argh! You guys are great.
Sigyn sighed, enjoying the flowery aroma of the new summer air.

It was a beautiful day on Asgard and she could hardly believe that it had been over a year since Darcy was proclaimed Loki’s advisor.

At first, she didn’t think it would affect her quite so much, but within the first season of Darcy’s new occupation, it was apparent that she was going to see more of her friend.

Darcy spent most weekends on Asgard and nearly every evening. She was there for the evening meal and then several meetings with Lord This or Lady That and in the first few months, Sigyn worried that her friend was spreading herself a bit thin.

Loki was always after her. Sigyn swore, whenever Darcy was hurting, Loki hurt with her.

Sigyn decided they would make a cute couple. Though she also suspected that Darcy had never been considered a high enough class to be worthy of a prince’s hand. It was the only explanation she could find as to why Loki had gone after Sigyn’s favor rather than Darcy’s.

Then again, she and Loki had been getting on rather well as of late. He was beginning to do more courtly things with her, like walks in the garden, lunch by the lake. They laughed and talked and Sigyn valued their time together. Loki was kind and polite, though she did not have as much fun with him as she did with Sif.

Sif was just fantastic. She was teaching her how to use a bow. Sigyn had seen accidents happen on the training field with axes and daggers and quite frankly, being in such close proximity to a person
while they bled made Sigyn queasy. So, she went for a weapon with distance. Sif had told her that it was good to know some kind of defense lest she was ever attacked.

Sigyn loved their lessons.

Sif would stand behind her, adjusting her fingers on the string, pressing on her shoulder to relax her muscles. Sometimes it was windy and their hair would blow together, the blonde and black strands mixing in the wind. Sigyn liked how it looked.

The warrior made Sigyn feel special.

As a lady growing up, Sigyn had been told constantly that she was beautiful. No boy looking for a dance nor Lord searching for a young lady for his son to court, could ever think of anything more original to call her than ‘beautiful’ or ‘gorgeous’. It was nice to know that they felt that way about her appearance, but it meant nothing to her. For so long she had been no more than someone beautiful to call on when a man required a prize.

Of course, becoming acquainted with Loki had been her first introduction to what it felt like to be more than just ‘beautiful’. She could tell that he liked her for what her mind had to offer and he was very gracious in telling her so. But that was it about Loki; he was far too refined.

She knew he had a streak of mischief and chaotic tendencies that Darcy would tell her of in their time together. Just recently, Darcy said they had gone into the city for a public address speech and Loki nearly caused an uproar in turning the visiting Lord Erlend’s armor green before his speech. He was forced to give his entire argument to Loki’s case while wearing the young prince’s colors. It was confusing for the public and Loki was very smug about it.

Sigyn never saw this side of Loki when they were together. Their walks and conversations, however light-hearted, lacked any of the mischievous hilarity that Loki showed around Darcy.

Nevertheless, Sigyn liked him. She liked how he looked and how he talked and he had the most pleasant smile. She would be a fool to say that his face was not slowly becoming a work of art in itself. She was a woman; she could admit that Prince Loki was a pleasing sight even if other ladies did not share her opinion.

Today was much like any of their recent outings. It was bright and sunny and she was holding onto his arm while they walked. If she asked, he would tell her the name of every flower they passed and what it meant.

“Loki?” she began, as their walk had been quite silent thus far.

“Yes, Sigyn?” Loki replied, leading them through an archway towards a particularly beautiful bunch of rose bushes.

She bent down to sniff the buds, speaking as her nose brushed over the soft red petals, still wet with dew from the night. “When is Darcy coming? She was not here last night when the Ambassadors from Alfheim arrived. I did think she was eager to meet them or at least be a part of their conferences.”

“She will be here soon I should think. I am going to visit her this afternoon. There was an urgent matter she could not get away from.” Loki said, giving her a warm smile as she took his arm again, the leather of his sleeve soft under her fingers.

Sigyn nodded, her curiosity piqued. Darcy, unlike many young ladies of the court, did not live inside the palace. She spoke of her parents occasionally, but not enough for Sigyn to know who
they were. Because of this, Sigyn believed Darcy was not born into wealth. She did not act it and she did not look it. There was an air amongst women who lived in luxury. They were hardened, carved women. Sculpted into marble brides in exchange for power. Sigyn was embittered in remembering that stone, no matter how beautifully cut, could hold no puissance.

Darcy could scarcely be called ‘hardened’. She was toned, but no part of her that Sigyn had seen could she compare to the other ladies. She was soft and was more developed as a woman than Sigyn ever planned to be in her life. The stuff Darcy was made of conformed to no mold and would not flake at the touch of a chisel.

It pleased Sigyn that a lady such as this was assisting in governing the realm she calls home.

The two continued on their way, enjoying the day and chatting about what Loki knew of archery. They smiled at each other and exchanged stories about rogue bow experiences. Loki claimed that Thor almost shot him with a flaming arrow at one point and Sigyn admitted to missing her target, her arrow landing in a wall not a hair’s breadth from the face of an Einherjar.

When Loki laughed, it made her want to hug him. Being friends with Loki always felt like that. It wasn’t the excited, energetic friendship she had with Darcy where everything that moved was made for merriment. Nor was it anything like her cheek-warming, heart-racing friendship with Sif.

It was subtler. Loki seemed a bit like safety to her. Like a harbor for a longship, she could idle at his side, heavy with the weight of guards returning from their shifts. She would relieve them there and her harbor would grant her reprieve. He was someone who she could be quiet with, who wanted to be with her in a peaceful relationship. This thought reminded her once again that if she were to marry any man, she would want him to be Loki.

Walking through the gardens was almost dream-like and she giggled when he pulled them down a less traveled route to an arbor whose presence was nearly obscured by a web of precious little blue flowers. Loki stopped them beneath it, beaming down at her.

“Sigyn,” he said, his tone turning serious.

“Loki,” she returned, letting him take her hands.

His smile was polite and very princely, though the pink on his cheeks did not go unnoticed by her. “I have a present for you.”

Sigyn raised her brows, delight flowing through her. “A present? For me?”

Loki lifted one of her hands, balancing her fingers on the tips of his. “May I?” he asked politely, insinuating that he wished to do magic.

She nodded her consent, awaiting the wonders that he was to conjure. In a series of small golden sparks and a bit of green light, Sigyn’s hand was decorated with a glove in her favorite shade of blue. It was supportive in some places, offering both flexibility and strength to her hand. She stared at it for a moment, noticing the threading was gold and the fabric was embroidered with golden replications of the flowers that coated the arbor they stood under presently.

She gasped, looking up to the prince. “Oh Loki, it is beautiful.”

He grinned and kissed her knuckles. “It is a gift to help with your archery. I hope it will alleviate some of the pain.”

Sigyn let her eyes dip down to examine Loki’s work. She could tell it was magically done, but his
stitching would have made some of the Queen’s Ladies jealous.

“Loki, thank you,” she told him meaningfully, wondering if she should take him into a hug as Darcy did. She thought better of it, for she was not Darcy and her cheeks warmed at the thought of stepping closer to him.

He dipped his head, a few black locks falling forwards. “Tis nothing, My Lady,” he told her, continuing to speak using very formal tongue. “Lady Sigyn, it is not only a gift, but also an offering, in hope that you will accept my proposition.”

Sigyn’s eyes widened. “What might this proposition be, My Prince?”

His smile threatened to turn mischievous and Sigyn could tell he was trying to restrain his teasing mirth. “The proposition is that you might consider official courtship with me.”

This was it, Sigyn thought. This was what her parents wanted from her, what she trained to be for so long: Partner to a Prince.

Her answer came without uncertainty and she held his hands a little tighter. “It would be my honor, Prince Loki, to be courted by you.”

He bowed his head again. “The honor is mine, Lady Sigyn.”

She smiled at the ground and felt her cheeks grow warm standing in such close proximity to her suitor. As Sigyn said before, she was not blind to Loki’s beauty nor was she impervious to his charm. Her palms, which were still being held by the fair prince, began to dampen as her heart increased in tempo.

Timidly, Sigyn looked up at him through her lashes, her eyes falling on his lips. They looked very nice. Loki had kissed her on a few occasions, and though he did not grant her first kiss, he was the best she had ever experienced at presenting such affection. When she was younger, boys like Fandrall would sweep her away to dance and take quick liberties with her lips. It was never much, just a peck of annoyance. She accepted it, granted them permission. But she never wanted to kiss them.

Sif had nice lips as well and she would admit to staring at them in a similar fashion. Like Loki’s, the woman warrior's lips were pink and often pressed into a hard line. But Sif’s were softer looking, plumper, more flesh there that imperiled any who kissed her to fall prey to getting lost amongst the profundity of her touch. Sigyn feared for any kiss between Sif and a man, for he would not know the care to expend when demonstrating their fondness.

Loki’s lips pulled up in the tiniest of smirks and Sigyn felt her face turn particularly hot. She very much wished to look away from her prince, but they were closer now and she wanted him to kiss her.

Was that a bad thing, she wondered. Was it bad for a lady to want a kiss? Or was this temptation left till marriage and the bed chamber as some of the older ladies told her?

She had not taken her eyes off Loki’s lips and she watched them move as he asked her a question of his own. “My Lady, might I borrow from you a kiss?”

Sigyn nodded, tilting her head back a little to force her attention to his eyes. There was humor there, but also a stirring of timorous uncertainty. “Only borrow?” she queried, amusing him with her words. “Not steal?”
Loki’s grin was fascinating as he entwined their fingers. “Oh no, I intend to return your kiss, Lady Sigyn.”

Sigyn did not ever think herself to be the kind of lady that swooned and sighed over men. She did not particularly like them enough to do so. But Loki’s mouth was such a silvertongued and magical thing that she was tempted to fall into a puddle on the ground and titter until the sun went down. His words were smoother than silk and his kisses were sweeter than honey.

When he finally touched her lips with his, she knew this kiss was not the same as their past ones. It began like she remembered, tender and soft. But it did not end as the others had. It kept going. It was warm, comfortable, and very nice.

“Sigyn!? Lady Asta wants to know if—oh…”

Instantly, Sigyn jerked her lips away from Loki’s, turning hastily to see who interrupted them. Lady Lorelei stood, red in the face, stammering out an apology. “Prince Loki…Lady Sigyn….I-I was just—”

Loki held up a hand to silence her, seeming not to care that they had been seen interacting in such an affectionate way. “My sincerest apologies, Lady Lorelei. I believe I’ve indulged in Lady Sigyn’s company for long enough.”

Sigyn felt hot. Whether from the sun or embarrassment, she was unsure. Lorelei curtsied, letting out a small giggle that told Sigyn her kiss with Loki would be the talk of the palace by this evening. Perfect.

“It is no trouble, Prince Loki. Lady Sigyn, Lady Asta would like to see you when you have the chance.” Lorelei addressed her, dropping into another curtsy before departing.

Loki then turned to her, looking just as embarrassed as she. “It has been good to see you, Sigyn.”

“Likewise, Loki,” Sigyn said, realizing that they were still holding hands. “I believe we both have duties to tend to.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, offering her a gentle smile. “I do hope we might be able to take another outing soon.”

Sigyn liked the sound of that and nodded almost bashfully. “I hope so as well.”

“Then I shall make it so,” Loki promised, bending his head to drop a kiss on the back of her hand. “Farewell, My Lady.”

Sigyn watched him walk away from the palace, towards the stables, Jörmungandr appearing from behind a bush to follow him. With a sigh, she turned towards the palace, sincerely wishing that Sif would not catch word of her endeavors from the ladies’ gossip. Who knows what they could be saying?

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Loki was having a truly excellent day.

Sigyn accepted his offer for courtship and they kissed, which was also very nice. He enjoyed it and he believed she did as well.

But that was not why he was so ecstatic.
He was going to go see Darcy while she was on her school trip in Washington D.C.

Traveling to Midgard would be quicker if he teleported straight from Darcy’s bedroom to her hotel in The United States’ capital city. He would meet her in the lobby of the address she’d given him a week ago, two days before she left.

The past year had been productive to say the very least. Having Darcy as his advisor was more helpful than he could have ever known. As an official member of the court, she was permitted to do just about anything that Loki was allowed to do and held her own responsibilities. It was stunning how efficiently she worked. Not only did she balance her school life with what most would consider full time employment, but she did so while also staying active with her soccer team and training with the Allmother.

Of course, it was very busy for the both of them. Loki understood her desires to stay on Midgard for now. But he was still searching for Idun and her garden. He was convinced that he would be able to get her an apple sometime during her twenties. Any time after that and people might begin to recognize her aging, hence breaking her Asgardian masquerade.

It was difficult to search for Idun, as she was magically concealed. Though, any skilled sorcerer would know the trace of a magical cover. The problem was knowing where to look for one. Asgard was nearly three times the size of Midgard and with twice as much empty, unpopulated space. It would be logical to assume that Idun would set her garden in the middle of nowhere, far removed from any city in particular. However, it also held true that Idun grew the most magical crop in the entire nine realms. Maintaining regular harvest would require her being some place where she had access to the things she needed to cultivate.

Of course, places like Nornheim wouldn’t have such things, would they? Magical material is nearly banned entirely there. It would make sense that Idun was situated somewhere between provinces. Possibly Ringsfjord. Probably Nastrond or Jolena.

All of his leads were assumption based and so far, he had no evidence to show for. Anyone who found Idun would have to be a genius, far more skilled than himself.

Jörmungandr took that moment to wind himself around one of Hel’s ribs, letting his tongue loll out while they rode so it flapped in the wind.

Loki sighed disapprovingly, shaking his head at the snake.

With a smile, he thought to all of the opportunities Darcy’s position had given him.

Power was a fickle thing, executing plays differently when given to certain people. Darcy seemed to be made for power. It suited her. Loki could only guess why.

Who was Darcy Lewis to uphold such a position? Who was she to do a job so thoroughly? She was a mortal. A brilliant little mortal with far more passion than one being should be capable of holding. Her mind impressed him. Her brain was impregnable to the idea of ‘impossible’ and Loki liked to watch her think.

She trained with his mother twice a week, every week. She told him that the training involved a lot of thinking and a lot of staring at objects and people. ‘Attention to Detail’ Darcy called it. She introduced bits of what his mother was teaching her and it seemed to be no more than quick analysis of what’s going on. Like how he taught her to fight.

Look at who you’re battling, find their weakness, use your strengths to destroy them.
Although his mother’s methods were slightly different and on a much larger scale.

Because, unlike Loki, she wasn’t instructing Darcy how to destroy her enemies. She was only teaching her to watch them. And Loki found that unnerving.

Nevertheless, the effects of her studies shone in the Asgardian population’s households. If his more menial financial meetings were anything to go by, Asgard’s overall happiness was at an all-time high, not that Asgard was economically unstable to begin with. Odin did a fine job of that. Darcy had ensured a certain satiability that had not gone unnoticed by anyone.

But she wasn’t proud or humbled by the experience. In fact, Loki didn’t think Darcy felt anything at all about it. Improving Asgard was her job, she told him that it was entertaining for her and good practice if she was ever going to become president of Midgard. Even so, he knew which parts of it she found exhilarating.

He could see it in her face.

He could see it in that little spark in her eye when someone went to prove her wrong, in the way she crossed her arms while giving the honest truth in a tone dripping with saccharin brutality, or when she realized her reason had fault and accepted it without even blinking an eye.

She liked feeling accomplished. Loki could understand that. He envied that feeling because while Darcy found joy in her groupings of accomplishments for Asgard, Loki was much harder to satisfy.

Unlike his friend, Loki did not find politics quite so enticing. In fact, they were boring and excruciatingly so. The humdrum of papers and notes and meetings and announcements was miserable to him. No matter how many treaties he convinced someone to sign or how many petitions he agreed to pass through, there was no gratification for him. He knew just around the bend there was something else waiting. There would always be some new trouble to worry about, something that would keep him awake when Darcy wasn’t there, something to brood over while people made messes of the realm he’d just worked so hard to clean up.

It wasn’t entertaining to him.

So, every now and then he liked to cause a little mischief. Cast a little magic to stir up trouble. Not a lot, just enough to make Darcy give him that sideways look. Teasing Darcy was entertaining. He didn’t play many of his tricks on her as he would not fare well against the repercussions of Darcy’s wrath. Any vengeance she took would be far too vicious for him to endure. Plus, she slept beside him quite often and Darcy’s bed was one place he felt fully comfortable dispatching his princely exterior to be none but Loki in the bond of friendship

Still, there were benefits to his dissatisfaction with politics. These benefits came in the form of magic and six mysterious stones scattered throughout the galaxy.

His and Darcy’s search had become rampant. They were relentless in their studies and chaotically so. While Darcy spent most of her time working or going through with politics and training with his mother, he was becoming more adept at magic. He realized, truly realized, his potential as a sorcerer. It was astonishing how much he could do if he set his mind to it.

Magic was interesting. And coupled with its Midgardian counterpart ‘science’ it was like balancing the world on your fingertips. Magic turned everything into clay, malleable in his hands.

Well, there were exceptions of course.

Ideas, for one, were quite inflexible. The map was an idea all laid out in the art of language. And of
course art would just have to be one of those things better left up to interpretation. Magic and science were decidedly not so open to such construal elucidation.

The map was, at least in the Midgardian portion, illegible. He couldn’t read it. He doubted anyone could. Language on Midgard evolved too fast and changed in far too many places. Finding the Tesseract had once again become a sort of distant aspiration. A hope. A folly. A lure for fools.

And what a fool he was. Darcy had full faith in the idea that the Tesseract was in fact on Midgard. Unfortunately for him, he could understand her logic and was desperate enough for mental stimulation that he allowed himself to become infatuated. Together they began searching through history.

Loki believed it was possible, arguably probable, for the Allfather to leave the Tesseract on Midgard. The problem was that they had no idea when he brought it down.

Obviously, there were some clues that indicated towards the age of Vikings, the time when the so called ‘myths’ were created and passed around. He and Darcy had deduced that these myths and fairytales had been told by Asgardians who could predict the future. They had come to Midgard and scattered around their predictions as storytellers and prophets of truth.

Of course, stories were altered and the humans had morphed him into some kind of miscreant who gave birth to horses and brought light to the true definition of ‘Chaos’.

The problem with these stories is that they existed before the attack of the Frost Giants. Odin could not have delivered the Tesseract to Midgard before the Frost Giants attacked. He would have done it sometime after the war. The question was: at what point after the war?

Darcy and Loki scoured through textbooks of literature, art, history. They researched everything before the fourteenth century and found nothing.

It was extremely frustrating. There was no word of Odin or any strange magical power sources. There was myth, yes. Pointless traditional folk-tales preached by lowly peasants of all kinds. Fables and stories passed along by mouth, finally written down by someone with the decency to keep track of such things.

But none of them fit. None of it made any sense.

They narrowed it down based on historical culture.

Their first belief was that Odin left it somewhere in Western Europe. Somewhere familiar where the people already heard of myths pertaining to him and his greatness. They would guard his treasures with their lives because they were too ignorant to do anything different.

Next, was that he went further south and left it somewhere in Northern India and Nepal, somewhere Hinduism would have been practiced regularly. Darcy believed that there were parallels that shouldn’t be ignored and that Indian culture was far richer in history than any place they’d studied on Midgard. He agreed in that respect. They most certainly had more content to look at there, though it was not all as relevant as he would like.

Lastly there was the possibility that Odin had dropped the Tesseract into the ocean, never to be seen again by anyone because he was, to use Darcy’s words, ‘an old coot who hates us and wants us to suffer forever researching how to properly sacrifice a goat’.

So far, they were more focused on the first two options.
It was arduous work, searching for something that didn’t exist to most people in the modern galaxy. Mostly, they were just poking at small oddities in the course of history, blips and mistakes that looked like magical intervention.

There was nothing.

That’s why Loki was going to see her on her last day in Washington DC. According to her, the place was rich with museums and official historians who spent their short Midgardian lifetimes researching specific things. Loki imagined he had done the same as them a couple hundred times over when refining his own skills through the years.

His and Darcy’s plan was simple and required effort of both their parts.

He would ride Hel to the passage that led under Darcy’s bed. From her room, he would teleport to the address she gave him for her school’s hotel in the capital. They decided he would not use a direct portal to Washington DC because it would be too obvious and he was unsure if one existed.

Darcy would feign sickness on her last day and she would not be permitted to go out because of this. Both of them agreed that it would be ill advised to have duplicates of the same person in such close proximity. It would greatly confuse the public if she was seen or caught on those pesky surveillance cameras that Midgardians kept around.

That week Darcy was supposed to have come up with a list of places they would go and at what times to avoid any kind of contact with her group. It was decided that he would meet her in the lobby after her group departed.

They had also decided to leave Jörmungandr and Fenrir at home, which is something they’d never considered before. However, they both agreed that having their pets would draw attention and not all animals were allowed into certain museums and libraries. It made Loki rather sad to think that their friends would not be able to tag along. Perhaps he could give them time together on Asgard and ask Hel to look after them. She might do it if he asked her to.

They arrived at the clearing, just before the portal to Midgard and Loki smiled at the surrounding forest. He had no need to ride Hel to the portal anymore as he could easily teleport there. But he enjoyed spending time with Hel. There was something immensely soothing about her presence.

Being a prince required that he occasionally travel to different provinces or cities, and when he did so, he would ride Hel. Darcy was permitted to go with him and she did when the circumstances suited her. Being his advisor meant that she could have her own horse if she requested one.

Well, one day she had because it had been a longer journey and she did not want to hurt Hel under both their weight. Darcy had been preparing to mount a steed when Hel drove herself between the two, making a point to bump Darcy with her nose. The message was quite clear that Hel was Darcy’s just as much as she was Loki’s.

He dismounted, landing in the grass alongside Jörmungandr. Debating his options, he looked to Hel pleadingly. “Hel?”

She turned her attention to him, bumping the bony side of her jaw against his cheek. Affectionately, he rubbed her neck. “Would you mind looking after Fenrir and Jörmungandr today?”

Hel stared at him blankly, snorting a puff of air over his face.

He sighed, preparing to negotiate with her. “Alright, I know they are…energetic at times—“
He was interrupted by Jörmungandr making a whining sound while dangling by his mouth from a tree branch. Loki could sense the exasperation seeping from his horse and he offered her his most desperate expression. "Dearest Hel, please will you do this for Darcy and I? If they are hurt or captured on Midgard we might never see them again. I know you care for them and would not want them to be lost to us in such a way."

Her bones clicked as she turned her black gaze upon him. He could smell an easy victory. “Darcy would be very pleased to know that they are in such capable hooves. Besides, they will look after you as well. Jörmungandr would rather eat his tail than see harm come to you or Fenrir.”

Up in the tree, Jörmungandr hissed a bark while he spinning around the tree trunk, happily chasing the scaly tip of his tail. Loki and Hel looked at one another and Loki smiled innocently, giving a quick nuzzle to the bony side of her face. It was rough and felt a bit strange, but Loki knew that not everyone would give that side of her attention.

She gave in and nuzzled him back, huffing bitterly. “Thank you, Hel. I will fetch Fenrir and then the three of you can be off.”

He faced the cave, preparing to enter when he heard a bark that sounded all too much like a hiss. He had just enough time to be surprised before Fenrir leapt from the portal in a flash of rainbow light. In mere seconds, Loki was pinned to the ground by a very excited dog, soon to be joined by an equally enthused snake, and of course Hel did not like to be left out of anything, so her nose was also added to the mix.

Loki rolled around, gently pushing away noses and tongues until he could sit up.

Fenrir had travelled by himself through a portal? Loki thought this was most interesting, though he was not entirely shocked. Both Fenrir and Jörmungandr had been showing signs of magical enhancement. Mostly subtle things like transporting themselves around.

Just this morning Loki told Jörmungandr not to follow him on his outing with Sigyn because, as nice company as he was, the snake liked to cuddle when he got excited. And Loki did not want to cuddle Jörmungandr while kissing Sigyn.

“Fenrir. Jörmungandr.” Loki called to them. They looked up from greeting one another to give him their full attention. He smiled, getting down on one knee to rub their backs while he talked. “Darcy and I are going to explore some things on Midgard today and it’s too dangerous for you to come.”

Disappointment was so clear on their faces that he could feel his heart breaking a bit. “No, do not give me those looks. Fenrir, you are not a puppy, stop whining like one. Jörmungandr, get your tail out of your mouth.” They did so and he continued. “Hel is going to look after you while we’re away. It won’t be any longer than a day. I will be back by tonight, but Darcy isn’t coming back until tomorrow at noon.”

Loki was pretty sure the two had stopped listening after he declared they were spending the day with Hel as they had begun chasing each other around her legs. Hel just stared at him with a cold, steady glare. He smothered a grin because in spite of her resentful behavior, Loki knew that Hel was also very possessive of the two little animals.

“Stay out of trouble!” he hollered after them as the three began to trot into the forest. “Hel, don’t let them eat anything that looks suspicious! And for mine and Darcy’s sakes, do not get lost!”

They didn’t pay him any mind as they continued on their way into the forest. Loki debated calling them back for a moment and taking them to DC with him.
Then he decided against it. Fenrir and Jörmungandr in a big city would not go well. He would have to keep faith in Hel.

Taking a deep breath, Loki went through the portal, gearing his thoughts towards his day with Darcy.

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Darcy was sitting in the hotel lobby, feeling quite proud of herself.

She’d faked being sick that morning and had absolutely no trouble convincing her teacher to let her stay in the hotel room all day long.

After her classmates had left for a day of sightseeing, Darcy got dressed in her jeans and plain t-shirt then went to wait for Loki to arrive. With her she carried her backpack that was filled with anything they might need for their day of research.

She stared intently at the automatic doors, waiting for the familiar form of her best friend to walk through.

Darcy was glad that she and Loki had the opportunity to take this break together. Being advisor to royalty was both a mentally stimulating and tiring occupation. She absolutely loved it.

Not only was she finally respected as an actual member of the court, she was learning while she was at it.

Frigga was becoming one of Darcy’s favorite people. Even after a whole year, she was still an enigma to her. Their time together was always interesting. One day, Darcy was staring into the scrying pool chatting about distinctive qualities in dirt with a dwarf woman and the next she was sitting with a committee for feast-planning, seeing how quickly she could count the number of jewels on a certain woman’s head-dress.

Everything Frigga had her do was very obscure and Darcy did question it on occasion.

A few months ago, the Queen had given her a strange sort of task, which was saying a lot because most of the things Frigga had her do were very odd.

This task was to take Odin’s horse, Sleipnir.

That was all the instruction she received.

Take the horse.

Darcy was at a loss when the Queen refused to elaborate. Was she supposed to steal it? Or was she just supposed to ride it? Unlike any of her previous assignments, she had no plan of how to go about it. She could not see the purpose of the exercise, nor the Queen’s intentions.

Nevertheless, Darcy had proceeded with much thought and consideration.

If she had been Loki, she would have used magic to turn herself invisible and guide the horse away, or perhaps just teleport them to a new location.

But Darcy was not Loki. She did not have magic and she did not intend to steal the horse for good. She also couldn’t go to Loki for help. It was one of Frigga’s rules that Darcy could not consult Loki unless given explicit permission to do so.
With that in mind, Darcy made up her mind on what to do.

Looking to gain acquiescence from Odin over borrowing his horse would have been trivial. As Loki’s advisor, Darcy occasionally had private meetings with Odin and a few other members of the court and she always worked her best at those times. Darcy would admit to herself that she was rather decent at her job and she fought to retain her good reputation.

Somehow, Darcy believed that Odin was suspicious, or even resentful of her. He was always cutting her off in the middle of her reports and was begrudging in accepting any of her proposals. It was quite damaging to her pride, especially since she worked so hard on everything she did. She assured herself that perhaps it was because of her age that he did not respect her as much.

Needless to say, Darcy did not ask the Allfather for permission.

Instead, she strolled into the stables as casually as possible, mounted Sleipnir and rode him away without even stopping to check her surroundings. She thought that maybe, if she acted like she was supposed to be taking Sleipnir, then no one would question her.

And they didn’t. She rode around for a while, having a friendly conversation with Odin’s horse, who didn’t seem to care much for pleasantries, before trotting back up to the stables to find Hel staring at her like she’d been betrayed.

Darcy spent the next ten minutes consoling the poor horse, convincing her that it was a task from the Allmother and it was completed now. Eventually, Hel forgave her and Darcy took the time to brush her mane before the Allmother came to find her and congratulate her on her execution of her assignment.

On their way back to the palace, Darcy had asked Queen Frigga why she hadn’t wanted Loki to accompany her on that specific job. Her answer was surprising coming from the Queen, though painstakingly obvious in Darcy’s eyes. She had said, “You and Loki are two entirely different people. There may come a time when your methods will work better than his or his better than yours. Independence is an important quality in partnership.”

Darcy had to agree with the Queen on that.

Sighing, she slumped back in her chair, staring at the door. “Oh my gods, hurry up, Loki.”

“Are we rushing? I couldn’t tell by how complacently you’ve been lounging about.”

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

Darcy nearly fell from her seat at the sound of his voice. “Loki!”

He threw his head back in laughter while Darcy stood up to shove his chest. “You’re horrible.”

His responding grin lit up the entire room. She knew being a trickster made him happy. Never before had his title been so fitting. She pouted anyways and his smile turned kind as he pulled her into a hug. “I know. It is good to see you.”

Darcy squished her face against his shoulder, subconsciously inhaling his scent. “It’s been a week, Loki.”

“A long week,” he added and she noticed he had switched to Midgardian clothes. He didn’t do so often, but when he did, he always put a lot of care into what he wore. Something told her that if she checked the label on his green t-shirt, it would be a designer brand.
She squeezed his middle a bit tighter, while he told her of Frank and Fenrir’s situation for the day. She listened, mentally plotting revenge for him sneaking up on her. She was in the perfect position to give him an awe-inspiring wedgie, so she went with that plan. While Loki neared the end of his explanation, Darcy slipped her hands under the hem of his t-shirt, searching for the waistband of his underwear. When she didn’t find it, she wiggled her fingers below his belt in order to find them. Still, the only thing she found was smooth skin.

Loki cleared his throat, “Darcy, not to sound rude, but what the Hel are you doing?”

She tore her arms away from him irritably. “Are you seriously not wearing any underwear?”

He raised a long black brow and Darcy felt her face go red when she realized her dreadful mistake. She had not meant to do that. Oh boy, she had really not meant to do that. “Well, surely you know the answer to that question now.”

She buried her face in her hands. “Dude! You’re supposed to tell me that before I go trying to give you a wedgie! And why aren’t you wearing underwear anyways?”

Loki shrugged, sporting a humored grin. “I find it uncomfortable.”

Darcy sighed, slapping a hand over her eyes and tilting her head back in distress. “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

“No at all,” he replied. “This is right at the top of the list along with your need for clarification on intercourse.”

Darcy kept her eyes firmly shut, shaking her head. “Just shut up, Loki.”

“Or perhaps last month when you spilled wine on—“

“Loki, I swear to Frigga, you’ll be the death of me,” she grumbled, taking his hand and pulling them from the hotel. “We’re going to go museum hopping now. If you say anything else, I will sew your mouth shut.”

He squeezed her hand in return, making the wise choice not to say anything while Darcy walked them to the bus stop.

As it turned out, museum hopping wasn’t the easiest thing to do without consistent transportation. Darcy had sixty American dollars, twenty of those dollars they reserved for bus fare though she claimed they wouldn’t need all of it.

Loki decided he did not like public transportation very much. Sure, electric busses, as far as Midgardian standards went, were cheaper, better for the environment and a good idea in theory. But he did not like that Darcy was so close to strangers. He ushered her in to sit by the window while he took his place closer to the aisle.

On the way, Darcy took out a notebook whose pages were filled with her notes. On a clean sheet, she had a list of libraries and historical settings that might be worth looking at.

They had ruled out The United States as any place Odin would have left the Tesseract. Loki doubted Odin would have dropped it anytime after the fifteenth century at the latest and he most certainly wouldn’t have waited until western culture had spread to the Americas.

Even if he had left it somewhere in the North American continent before Europeans came, the Tesseract would have been left in the hands of a Native American tribe and most of those were
destroyed by the racist hands of those who constructed the nation that stood today.

If the Tesseract had fallen into their hands, Loki and Darcy had reason to believe that the capitalists of U.S. history would not have allowed such an object to go unused.

Therefore, most American history was rather useless to them.

Even so, Darcy insisted that they inspect a few of the art museums, claiming that art could sometimes hold secrets and mysteries of the past.

Loki agreed that this was indeed true and he went with her to three different types of art museums. By the time they were halfway through the third it was two in the afternoon and he could tell Darcy was getting frustrated.

She stared at an ornate Ming vase with the kind of contempt one typically reserved for their rivals.

He moved to stand beside her, gently bringing a hand to the junction between her neck and shoulder in order to massage some of the tension from her muscles. She sighed, leaning into his touch. “This shouldn’t be so hard.”

Loki frowned, rubbing his thumbs in circles at the base of her neck, waiting for her body to relax. “Well, it shouldn’t exactly be easy, should it?”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” she groaned, turning her back to his chest and slumping against him. “The Tesseract should have been found! There’s years and years and years of myths and stories and magic…but they’re all so obscure!”

Loki wrapped his arms around her middle, settling his chin on her shoulder, staring at the vase. An intricate blue dragon swirled around the body, the surrounding pattern creeping up the neck of the vase. “Magic and gods were explanations for everything Darcy.”

She snorted. “I know that. But it doesn’t stop it from being any less frustrating. All these traditions and beliefs…they have to stop somewhere…there has to be a defining point where someone…anyone realized that there was something more than just God that made the world spin.”

“I think the word you are searching for is science.” Loki teased, “And that didn’t truly evolve until the twentieth century.”

Darcy let out a gust of air from puffed cheeks. “And of course that’s when governments started keeping things from the people and getting more discreet. Even if something did happen it wouldn’t have been shared publicly or been reported by the media…” she stopped talking, slowly coming to make sense of her own words.

A slow smile formed on Loki’s face as he too came to the realization of this possibility. “Darcy—“

“Loki!” she gasped, breaking away from his embrace and turning to him. Her face split into an unfeasibly wide grin. “It makes sense!”

“Of course it does,” he agreed, rubbing his chin in thought. “Odin might have left it sooner, but if it was discovered again…it would have been researched in the name of science rather than magic.”

“And obviously the government isn’t going to want an entire country to know about the top secret artifact they found, so they won’t tell anyone about it, especially when there were so many wars happening.”
Both of them began to pace in opposite directions, necks bent in serious thought. “Yes. But which war? The twentieth century was quite possibly the most progressive and evolutionary time-span in all of Yggdrasil. Things moved too fast. Technology advanced…”

Darcy made a frustrated sound in the back of her throat. “I don’t think it would have been World War I. I mean, weapons technology advanced, but it wasn’t nearly what it could have been. No one was quite so desperate at the beginning of that war either. It was made from military tension and short little political battles in the past century.”

“The Vietnam War?” Loki suggested, remembering the so called ‘Pentagon Papers’ that had been a mystery to the entire public until released. The documents revealed plans of attack that had been kept from not only the people of the United States, but much of the congress as well. It was an excellent show of how much the government kept from its people.

Darcy shook her head. “That’s a bit late, I think. Modern development and land usage would have found wherever the Tesseract was by then. Vietnam and the Cold War were both…well…I don’t know. They don’t seem desperate enough to me. Not to keep something like the Tesseract a secret. It’s science. Science and magic. If it had been discovered that late in the twentieth century there would have been millions of papers published on it.”

Loki agreed with a nod. “World War II then?”

She shrugged her pace increasing in speed. “It makes more sense to me.”

“Indeed,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. “Where is the nearest World War II museum?”

Darcy’s head snapped up and she pulled her backpack off, procuring her map. “Uhh…let’s see...Oh! Right across the street! My group went there yesterday. I think they wanted to come back today though because we didn’t get to see all of it.”

Loki pressed his lips together. “Would it be possible for us to go anyways?”

“Duh. We just have to avoid being seen. Which is why, yesterday, I bought us these.” She pulled from her bag two baseball caps. One of them was navy blue and the other was black.

He made a face when she handed him the navy blue hat. “Can I at least have the black one?”

They traded and he begrudgingly put on the baseball cap, sneaking a glance at himself on a bit of reflective glass they passed on their way out. “Darcy, I look ridiculous.”

“Says the guy with the ostentatiously horny helm. Just wear the damn hat,” Darcy demanded, taking his hand and pulling him behind her as they walked towards the largest museum he’d seen all day.

Darcy paid for their admission and they explored the exhibits. Despite their frantic search, Loki was rather engaged with the things on display. The aircrafts were impressive. While Asgardian longships had similar motors, they were magically advanced. It was amazing what Midgardian achieved without the aid of magic. He doubted all of them would be able to learn the fundamentals of magic as it related to their sciences as well as Darcy had. She was extraordinary in her abilities to gain knowledge of anything she set her mind to.
They kept their heads low, reading plaques along the way. Loki noticed that Darcy was paying special attention to her surroundings.

At one point, they stopped at a display featuring weaponry in the Navy. Loki was reading about the different battleships and Darcy made a face.

“What is the matter?” he asked, turning to her.

The face she was making intensified and Loki identified it as a cross between irritation and disgust. “Nothing.”

He rolled his eyes, glancing around the room. There were not many people. A security guard stood watching, a heavy-set man in khaki shorts admired a few of the navy suits, and a few girls were seated on a bench holding brochures.

“Nothing?” he questioned suspiciously. “You’re a terrible liar.”

She smirked, “Yeah. I know.” The look on her face softened and she lowered her voice. “The girl in the white shirt has been staring at us since we walked in.” She cast a sideways glance over her shoulder. “Well, not really ‘us’. She’s been staring at you.”

Loki cocked a brow, turning to look at the girl. She was indeed staring at him. He caught her eye and she looked away quickly. He frowned down at his friend. “Do you think it is the hat? I told you I look ridiculous.”

Darcy took in a deep breath through her nose, letting it out through her mouth. “Loki, I love you, but you’re so thick. Come on, let’s keep moving.”

Loki shot one last glance at the girl who was peeking up at him through her lashes. He offered her a shy smile, hoping that she realized his atrocious headgear did not define his otherwise charming personality.

He was out of the room before she could return the smile.

After about five minutes of seemingly aimless wandering, he addressed his friend. “Have you found anything yet?”

She sighed, shaking her head. “No. There’s nothing. No political scandals in the U.S. that I haven’t heard of before. Nothing that seems distinctly out of place…”

Loki pressed his lips together, staring ahead at an advertisement for the ‘Captain America Exhibit’. A thought struck him. “Darcy, what if it wasn’t America that had anything to do with it?”

A little crease appeared between her eyebrows and she pushed up her glasses. “Well, yeah. We agreed it was probably some European nation that had it first…why?”

He took her hand, tugging her towards the newfound exhibit, talking fast. “Right before the war, a great deal of German scientists came over to the United States so they would not have to work under Hitler, yes?”

“Yes…”

“Well…” he began obviously as they entered the darker exhibition area. “Germany! It makes more sense that Odin would have left it in Germany a few years after the war with Jotunheim. Of course it wouldn’t have been Germany back then. But, still, they would have kept it safe for a long period
“What does that have to do with German scientists?” Darcy asked as he pulled her around a rather large image of Captain America. Darcy was mildly disappointed that she didn’t get to appreciate the spectacle that is America’s most renowned old-timey hero.

Loki made an irritated sound. “What doesn’t it have to do with German scientists? They fled, Darcy! They fled. Someone must have known about it, or someone must have been mad enough to find it. Now…” he pulled them into a corner and took out their map while Darcy looked around the room.

It was probably the busiest exhibit they’d been in thus far, though she paid special attention to a man in a formal suit and tie talking to a security guard. “…the full set. They’re vintage too. I always keep them close.”

The security guard didn’t seem too impressed with the man’s trading cards. “Oh yeah? Where do you keep ‘em, your gym locker?”

The suited man clasped his hands behind his back, turning his attention towards a display of sniper rifles that once belonged to one of Captain America’s Howling Commandos. “Maybe.”

Loki poked the map, looking up to point at a large information board. “There. Darcy, name one of the most accomplished German scientists of that time.”

“Albert Einstein,” she guessed.

Loki looked personally offended and Darcy had the urge to laugh. Darcy liked science, but Loki was, to be honest, a nerd. He swooned over past scientists and their works. He read their biographies and studied their fields. “Darcy, really! We are standing in the middle of an exhibit that wouldn’t have been possible without his genius!” he gestured again to the info board. “Doctor Abraham Erskine? Creator of the formula that turned Steve Rogers into Captain America?”

Memory of Doctor Erskine’s accomplishments rushed back to her and she nodded enthusiastically. “Riiight! This guy. Sorry, I remember now. He moved to America because he felt threatened by that one guy who went rogue from Hitler and had this whole other secret organization called—“

“—Hydra.” Loki breathed, turning her by the shoulders so they faced a smallish table with a brief description of the organization and their leader, :”Johann Schmidt.”

Darcy read the plaque aloud. “HYDRA was originally a branch of Nazi Germany’s deep science division. They researched new ways to create weapons that would ultimately change the war. However, the leader of this division, Johann Schmidt, drove HYDRA into the ground after experimenting on himself with a replica of Dr. Abraham Erskine’s earlier formulas. Schmidt, with the assistance of scientist Armin Zola, was able to set up new weapons laboratories and factories across western Europe that were later taken down by Captain America and his team, the Howling Commandos.”

Loki smiled in a way that Darcy had learned meant trouble and a night full of nothing but textbooks and note-taking. “What do you think?”

But Darcy was drawn to this now. It made sense. “I think it fits. Are there any other descriptions of HYDRA? What they did? How they did it? I know they manufactured advanced weaponry, but there are no elaborations.”

Loki scanned the room. “I don’t see anything. I don’t think there are.”
Darcy’s heart was beating out of her chest and she could feel the energy surging through her. “Loki…oh my gods…Loki this…is it possible? Could the Tesseract be harnessed to create weapons? I mean, I know it’s powerful, but taking that energy? Manipulating it that way? Is it possible?”

Loki read over the plaque again, green eyes burning with intensity. “I think so. It would be difficult. This person, Armin Zola, would have had to have some basic idea of magic to be able to accomplish such a task. And he would have had to do it without the help of an Asgardian. It would have created another branch of scientific study entirely…” he trailed off and he got that starry look in his eye when a scientist did something especially admirable.

Darcy snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Stay with me, Lokes. This is serious. Secret evil weapons manufacturers. Did Schmidt really use one of Erskine’s formulas?”

Loki nodded, thinking back to what he’d read on Erskine. “Yes. Though, it did not have the same effect. Apparently, it turned him insane. After Erskine realized that Schmidt was a monster, he came to America and started working for the government.”

She looked at him curiously. “What branch of the government? I don’t remember reading anything about that.”

Loki pulled down his cap, leading them further away from the crowd of people. “It was very difficult to find the answer to that question. He worked for a group called SHIELD. They were the supporting foundation for Captain Amer—“

"What?"

Loki frowned at her, "What do you mean, 'What'?"

Her blue eyes became unfocused for a moment as she thought. "I haven't heard of SHIELD. Loki, government are my things. Why don't I know about it?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Loki debated telling Darcy a lie. Admittedly, he had done some 'exploring' on Midgard without her. Not far, just poking around here and there, getting more closely acquainted with the mortals. They were quite a lively bunch and much more culturally diverse than Asgardians. They were not the primitive people Aesir believed them to be. Darcy knew of his lonely excursions that he took while she was at school and agreed to them only because he had only ventured out on his own twice.

The first time, he had sought to find better books. Naturally, he wanted first edition copies of ancient texts. He wanted old things that held clues as to where the Tesseract could be. To do this, he traveled to several wealthy Midgardian universities, many of which held texts worth considerable amounts of money that the public was unable to see. Loki, as it happened, was not part of the average Midgardian public and magically found his way to the books undetected. Unfortunately, his efforts had been wasted. There was nothing that could help him there.

The second time was an errand he originally meant to run for Darcy. She wanted to know more about ‘gamma radiation’, claiming that it was possible the tesseract could give off some sort of trace with these. Well, little did his dear friend know that there were not many places that just left gamma rays laying about. He didn't know how they worked. Sure he knew 'in theory' but he was a sorcerer. Sorcerers never accomplished anything with theory. The word made him cringe. He discovered a facility that housed such an interesting device somewhere in New Mexico that had taken him a full two hours to find and teleport to. Sadly, once he got there, he realized the facility had long since been destroyed and there was no such ray there for him to investigate.
Because teleporting across the United States was not easy work, Loki choose to bide his time and build up his strength. He scouted the remains of what used to be the lab, keeping an eye out for anything entertaining or an indication as to what had eradicated such a structure. In fact, he was so caught up in his explorations that he did not notice the approaching of a black car until it was nearly too late. He turned himself invisible and waited for the occupants of the car to step into the light. They did and Loki searched their minds quickly.

On most occasions, Loki tended to steer clear of flicking through the thoughts of others. But when danger threatened on the horizon...well, he did promise Darcy that he would figure out how to explain gamma radiation to her. The minds of those men had proved to be quite informative. Upon quick but thorough search through their brains, it was clear they worked of a covert organization named SHIELD. He hadn't been too concerned with that and he immediately made the connection to his current favorite scientist, Dr. Abraham Erskine. What he found interesting was the fact that one of them had memories of a gamma ray. He was not in the practice of extricating memories from a person and he overexerted himself. Hours later, he woke up in the sand. Drained, but had enough magic in him to teleport back to Darcy's room and faint in her bed. He didn't wake up until the next morning, at which point Darcy was already pushing him for information about gamma radiation. He told her what he could and the memory of SHIELD stayed with him as an unimportant detail.

He knew they were secret, but he did not know they were so discreet to go undiscovered by the keen eye of Darcy Lewis.

"Loki..." Darcy brought him back from his memories with her challenging tone.

Holding up his hands, he sought to set her at ease. "Let me explain..." the truth flowed from him like water and Darcy gave him a disbelieving look.

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" she asked.

He shrugged, "It seemed unimportant."

She sighed, "Well, maybe if you had told me sooner, I would know who these 'SHIELD' people are. I have no idea!"

Loki licked his lips in thought, "I believe their earlier name, used around the time of Dr. Erskine and Captain America was the Strategic Scientific Reserve? The S-"

“Peggy Carter!” Darcy nearly shouted and Loki had to put his hands on her shoulders to stop her incessant bouncing.

“What?”

Darcy looked like she could beat him with Captain America’s shield. “Loki...Loki come on. Peggy Freaking Carter? She was, like, one of the founding members of the SSR. Of course I know what SHIELD is! You do realize that Peggy Carter is my hero. She was...is...the absolute best. I don’t know a whole lot about her younger years, there isn’t a whole lot of information about that other than the fact that she was Captain America’s go-to lady when it came to figuring out strategy.

“That and she pretty much created the SSR. And she was one of the most powerful women in the world at one point. She didn’t take anything from anybody!” Darcy sighed and turned to stare at a large, blown up image of Peggy Carter. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Loki nodded in agreement. “She is a very accomplished woman. How much information is there
about her and SHIELD?"

Darcy shook her head. “Not a whole lot. There’s hardly anything actually.”

“That is unusual, I think.” Loki said, staring vacantly at Captain America's motorcycle. "The SSR did not bother to hide their work with Steve Rogers after he became Captain America. Well, at the very least, they did not hide their existence from the public."

“Obviously they changed their priorities at some point,” Darcy muttered, taking his hand and leading them to a dark area, reminiscent of a theatre. A few short benches were splayed out, though none of them were occupied.

A short movie about Captain America was playing and showing videos of his USO tour before he became the legendary hero mortals recognized him as today.

They sat through the film watching interviews of Captain Steve Rogers. In many of the takes he was accompanied by a slightly shorter man with brown hair and an incredibly cocky grin. And by the looks he was giving Captain Rogers and the familiar way the two interacted, Loki would have to guess they were a bit more than just childhood friends.

Darcy leaned her head on his shoulder and the rim of her hat poked his chin. He didn’t mind. “James Barnes. That’s his friend.”

Loki smirked. “His special friend.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “Seriously?”

He shrugged, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “It looks like it. They seem incredibly close and it is never uncommon for men at war to become involved.”

“But…Peggy Carter,” Darcy replied.

Mirth filled his eyes. “Yes, I think he liked her as well.”

Darcy couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, sure. Why not? They both seem pretty amazing. I’d take both.”

“Really?” Loki questioned, considering Captain Rogers’ partners. “He most certainly was partial, wasn’t he?”

“Partial?” Darcy snorted, blinking the admiration from her eyes in order to see past the magnificence of Peggy Carter. “Loki, please tell me you aren’t talking about figure types.”

“Darcy, you cannot deny, both James Barnes and Peggy Carter had very muscled thighs.” He defended his point as the three of them started laughing on screen. It wasn’t outright hysteria, and their faces adhered to a certain seriousness that Loki assumed came with war. But it was a splash of happiness, a hint at an inside joke that the rest of the world may never know.

Darcy watched the film for a few more seconds before responding. “I guess so. But he would have liked them more than just their thighs. Maybe he just really liked sassy brunettes.”

James Barnes donned a settled kind of look as he watched Captain America talk. The words being said weren’t especially important. He was only giving words of encouragement about the armies’ accomplishments, none of his own or of SHIELD’s. James Barnes was expressive in ways he had probably been unaware of. It made him seem younger to Loki, like he could truly identify with the
soldier.

Because Loki knew that James Barnes was giving Steve Rogers the same look he gave Darcy on a daily basis. She was a little person who regularly endangered herself if he didn’t look after her constantly.

Then she would prance around with her big, innocent, easy-to-read eyes and act like she hadn’t just gotten them in heaps of trouble. Or just herself. Like that one time, on Jotunheim when she openly offended a monstrous Frost Giant.

Or perhaps that other time when she—

“Darcy?” he glanced to the empty seat next to him, then around the rest of the theatre. The film was over and he had somehow lost Darcy. “Odin smite me,” he muttered, hurrying out of the dark room.

He scanned the exhibit, panic starting to settle in, when he spotted her absurd hat near the edge of the room. Breathing a sigh of relief, he approached her, acknowledging that she had sprung up conversation with one of the museum employees. He was currently speaking to her in a lighthearted tone, “Oh no, we don’t have any of that kind of information. But I’m sure if you go to one of the libraries around here, you should be able to find something more on HYDRA and SHIELD. You know the Triskelion is their headquarters and that’s here in DC. The libraries are sure to have one thing or another.”

Darcy nodded, offering the worker a kind smile. “Thank you, Sir.”

“No problem, young lady,” he sighed. “Good to see kids so interested in their history.”

She grabbed Loki’s hand, eagerly tugging him away. Once they were out of the museum she let out a distressed groan. “Ugh! That man knew nothing! Did he really just think that we could walk into a library and pull out a book on SHIELD? Like I haven’t tried that! There. Is. Nothing,” she sniffed, plopping face down on the grass in defeat. “And I’m hungry.”

Loki sighed, getting down onto his knees beside his friend and opening her backpack. After shuffling around, he found her cell phone and checked the time. “We’ve missed lunch.”

“I have granola bars,” she mumbled into the earth.

Rooting around some more, his fingers came in contact with the plastic wrapper of a granola bar. She sat up and split the snack with him. “This is miserable.”

“Why?” he asked, taking a bite of his granola. It was sweet and he wondered if he could discreetly get away with conjuring a bottle of water.

“Because!” Darcy yelled, ripping off her hat and shoving it in her bag. “SHIELD probably has all of their important information either in the Triskelion or inside one of their databases, which we wouldn’t be allowed access to anyways.”

Loki thought over her last statement while slowly chewing the last of his granola bar. “Why would we need permission?”

Darcy blinked at him. “I never said we did. I just said we weren’t allowed.”

Mischief overcame his features and Darcy had an urge to shield that look from the public. Anyone who saw his face would know he was up to something. “Loki…”
“Come.” He said, standing up and tearing off his hat. “Let’s go to the library. I have a plan.”

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“Darcy,” Loki said in a reasoning tone. “It makes sense.”

She made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. “Yeah, it makes sense, but it’s also illegal. You might not have to live in this country, but I do.”

Loki desperately wanted to point out that she was always free to come and live on Asgard, but he refrained from doing so. It would not help him get his way. “You will not get caught. Besides, it will be completely unidentifiable how I did it or who did it. They will only know that it was routed through this computer.” He gestured to the library’s thick hard drive.

Darcy lowered her voice to an angry whisper. “Hacking into SHIELD’s database with magic is really not the most secretive we can be.”

He leaned forwards on his elbows, “Do you have any other options? Please, do share them.” She said nothing and so he continued in a pleadingly logical manner. “Darcy, it is the simple matter of obtaining information. We aren’t trying to do them any damage, we are only working to gain knowledge about a certain lost artifact.”

She sighed, letting her forehead fall against his. “Don’t use that Silvertongue on me, Loki. If we do this, there are going to be consequences. You can open it up easy enough, but SHIELD is likely to have a really great firewall. Do you know enough to keep them from detecting us?”

Loki thought back to all he had learned of computers. Really, he found them fascinating and it gave him hope that Midgardians knew a bit more about magic than he was first led to believe. He discovered a while back that he could easily manipulate code using the same sort of mathematical transference he did to relate magic to science.

Though he was very good at this, he’d never really hacked anything before. The prospect seemed fun. This was the perfect opportunity to test out what he knew while gaining them possible knowledge about the location of the Tesseract.

He referred to Darcy’s question thoughtfully. How long could he keep SHIELD from detecting them? He could sense Darcy’s impatience and he took her hand. “One moment. I need to think.”

She nodded, siding up to him and voicing her thoughts. “If you’re going to use this computer as our main-frame, we won’t go undetected for long.”

Loki agreed, thinking things through rather quickly. Magic and science were so closely related that they had become one in the same for Loki. Discerning one from the other seemed nonsensical at best. Computer science, as Loki understood it, offered more of a connecting support between the two fields. What could be done with programming was so very close to magic. It was just the mechanics that created the dividing barrier.

That and the technology was not advanced enough.

He had a theory that in the upcoming future Midgardian technology would progress to the point where it could sustain his magic entirely. The machines and his energy would be able to work harmoniously. The technology was dough and Loki had the power to knead it however he liked.
The only problem was his dough was not quite so put together yet. It was too sticky and too wet and if he tried to make bread, surely its consumers would sense something’s amiss.

Using the library computer as a conduit for his magic would be acceptable, but not flawless. He would be able to use it to get through SHIELD’s firewall, but only for a limited time frame.

“You’re right,” he said, letting his gaze rest on Darcy’s face. “I can get us ten minutes. Exactly ten minutes.”

Darcy pressed her lips together, taking out her notebook. “We need to find some way to organize this. If we only have ten minutes to search through SHIELD’s main hard drive, we have to pick our viewing content ahead of time. We have to know what we’re looking for.”

“HYDRA.” Loki answered her unspoken question. “Write down only the important things.”

“We need to be more specific than just HYDRA.” She sighed, removing her glasses in frustration. “Alright. I’ll time us. We’ll have two minutes to figure out the organization of the database. Once we know that, we should be able to find anything we need.”

“Very well,” Loki agreed, pressing his palms to the hard drive. “I await your word.”

She looked to the clock, counting down the seconds till the minute hand hit the twelve. “Five… four…three…two…one.” The clock struck four and Loki channeled his magic into the computer.

It felt sluggish. Getting past the inner workings of such complex science through such rudimentary technology was like being a modern engineer and only having the wheel to work with.

It was a miserable three seconds before SHIELD’s firewall was breached. “We’re in.”

The screen lit up with file upon file of data and Darcy moved through it with her fingers trembling from adrenaline. Loki read the screen, and picking up Darcy’s notebook. “What have we got?”

Darcy shook her head. “Everything is stored under this firewall. Every single person’s file, salary. Any money that was ever spent. Every penny given to SHIELD is open to us. I haven’t found any way to search it.”

Loki pushed the notebook into her lap, his hands taking place of hers on the keyboard. “Sometimes I wonder,” he began, typing in a few commands and giving them a magical boost, “how Midgardians do anything without magic.”

The screen blurred for a moment before a file labeled ‘Unknown’ popped up. “Start reading,” Loki instructed and Darcy did so, her hand flying across the sheet faster than he could read the words, which was saying something.

He skimmed through, searching for mention of HYDRA. He was surprised about how very little there was. Why was there so little?

One precious minute passed before he found something. “Here, Darcy.” He indicated to the lines of text before reading them aloud. “It is unclear what powered the HYDRA weapons. Doctor Armin Zola, SHIELD’s main source of information about HYDRA and its leader, Johann Schmidt, claims that he does not know. The source of power was a mystery even to him. Several HYDRA weapons are in SHIELD custody and have been studied. Their power source is unknown to SHIELD.”

Darcy groaned, slamming her pen down. “Find what they have on the HYDRA weapons. Or this ‘Armin Zola’ guy. He didn’t just work for Johann Schmidt and not know what powered the
Loki searched the database again, taking ten seconds to read over Darcy’s notes. “Why did you write that down?”

“Write what down?” Darcy asked, eyes trained on the computer screen.

Loki squinted to read her tiny handwriting. “The disappearance of Peter Quill?”

She shrugged. “It had a reason for being in SHIELD’s unknown file. They wouldn’t just keep a document of any missing kid.”

Loki agreed, but he didn’t think it would be all that useful if they were searching for infinity stones. Finally, he booted up an image of the HYDRA weapons, accompanied by a report of their functions.

Darcy read through it, taking notes, and sketching a quick drawing of the weapon. “It’s mechanical.”

“What?” Loki asked distractedly.

“The functions on it are mechanical, but not combustible,” Darcy pointed out. “Whatever it was that made HYDRA’s weapons so dangerous, it was in the ammunition.”

“And they haven’t got any of that,” he muttered, eyes flicking over the screen.

Five minutes left.

“Find Armin Zola.”

Loki did so, and a few seconds later, the screen was filled with everything SHIELD knew about the doctor. “He turned over to SHIELD after being captured.”

Darcy hummed, the tip of her pen flying. “Is it safe to assume he wasn’t really on their side?”

“Yes,” Loki affirmed. “Apparently, even SHIELD didn’t think he was on their side. He gave away a lot of Schmidt’s plans, but not important ones. All of them lead to dead ends. He discovered that he had a terminal illness and spent the next few years on an unknown project. It doesn’t say he did a lot to help SHIELD actually.”

Darcy wrote down what she could on the page and shook her head. “The secret to this isn’t Armin Zola. He died a faithful HYDRA member, even if he didn’t get a chance to spread the idea around. We need something more substantial. We need the location.”

She looked at the clock.

Three minutes remained.

“Okay, we can assume, for the time being, that it was the Tesseract that was the key power source in making these weapons.” Darcy reasoned, subconsciously making little marks on the paper with her pen. “But if the powerful part of the weapon was in the ammunition, they would have had to find some way to either harness the power or use the Tesseract to get the power from some other place.”

Loki thought with all his might, clamping a hand over his eyes. “The Tesseract would have been extremely unstable no matter what they did with it. The infinity stones…I am not sure but I believe
they are almost sentient. It would have been extremely docile for a very long time. Perhaps it would have been more cooperative towards their efforts if it meant having something to do.”

She groaned, pressing her palms over her eyes. “Who was that guy?”

“Be more specific Darcy. There are quite a lot of ‘guys’ in history.”

She made frantic hand gestures as the seconds ticked by. “The inventor guy with all the money that pretty much took over independent weapons manufacturing after WWII. The face of freaking Capitalism. He had a son…Like, ‘Birdie’ or something?”

Loki shook his head. “Stark. Howard Stark.”

Darcy snapped her fingers. “Yes. Him. He led a search, didn’t he? To find Captain America and the HYDRA ship he crashed. Did he find anything?”

Quickly, Loki pulled up Howard Stark’s file and skimmed through it, shaking his head. “No. He didn’t find anything of use. Well…maybe. There’s something noted as ‘strange wreckage’ but there isn’t anything else…” his eye caught something. “Wait a minute…”

“What?” Darcy asked, picking up her pen again.

“On Captain America’s first unofficial mission into a HYDRA base, he brought something back with him. Howard Stark did experiments with it. They didn’t get very far because the samples of the weapons they had were too unstable. Everything kept exploding. They didn’t have the proper technology to analyze it.”

Darcy made a panicked sound.

One minute left.

“So, since none of this was ever figured out, we can assume that SHIELD does not have the Tesseract and it is somewhere under the sea?”

Loki made an oblivious gesture. “If it went down with Steve Rogers, then yes. But it could have been moved to another place. Johann Schmidt could have left it somewhere.”

Darcy stabbed her noted with her pen. “But where the hell did he find it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Agh!” Darcy screamed, far too loudly for a library. “Look up churches!”

Loki gave her a sideways glance, “Darcy…”

“Loki, we are talking about the death of all things religious and the rise and evolution of science. There is a very small, practically miniscule chance that a church has an answer. Churches were preserved and treasured and restored because people cared about tradition. If anything precious and powerful was being kept in Western Europe before WWII, it would have been kept in a church because people called science ‘divine intervention’! Search the damn churches!”

Loki searched the damn churches. “Fine! There they are, what do you need from them?”

“Look for ones that were weird. Ones that were destroyed ones that—“

The screen went dark. Their time had run out.
“Shit,” Darcy swore and Loki glared at her disapprovingly.

She crossed her arms. “Don’t look at me like that. This is a shitty situation.”

He sighed. “You are not wrong.” Carefully, he withdrew his magic from the hard drive. “We need to leave here. No doubt SHIELD has tracked where the breach came from. My magic is unidentifiable, but they will know that it was this computer that was used.”

Darcy gathered up their stuff, shoving her glasses back on her face. She picked up the notebook. “Can you put this in my bedroom? Like, magically? I don’t want to lose it.”

“Of course,” he said, taking the book and magicking it away.

Once Darcy’s bag was on her back, they hurried from the library, heads bent in conversation.

“Loki, how is your magic untraceable, yet the computer is?” she inquired as they rounded a corner.

He spoke in a low voice, loud enough for only her to hear. “Midgardian technology is extremely behind what it could be, though I expect it to advance in the next few years. Nevertheless, what I did was seemingly impossible by Midgardian standards. It was like a set of gears. In order to make SHIELD’s gear turn clockwise, I had to turn the gear at the library turn counter-clockwise. If the technology had been more advanced, I would have been able to separate SHIELD entirely and make it go any which way I wanted,” he explained. “I have a book. I’ll lend it to you.”

Darcy sighed, running a hand through her hair. “I feel like I’m really behind on science. Being an advisor is really time consuming.”

Loki shook his head, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Darcy, you are in no way behind. You have extended your studies towards political science, as it interests you and is far more beneficial to you.”

“Technically speaking,” Darcy said, leaning into his side. “Political Science would be better for you to learn as well. If you’re going to be king someday…”

Loki pressed his lips together. “If I am to be king…. Darcy, I am not even sure I wish to be King of Asgard.”

She smiled like this wasn’t a surprise to her. “Really? I had no idea.”

“Was that sarcasm?” he asked, causing her to laugh.

“Oh, come on, Loki,” she teased, elbowing him in the ribs. “I know you better than that. You’d be bored as King of Asgard. You’d hate every second of ruling except for the parts where you could cause trouble.”

“That is very true,” he admitted, giving his friend a sad smile. “But it isn’t up to me and I do not know who the Allfather would prefer to make King.”

Darcy opened her pouty mouth to respond when something caught her eye on the other side of the street they were walking on. The sidewalk was less crowded now, though still full of people as it was only a bit passed four.

There was a very distinct looking man in a suit, and he was looking right at them. Darcy recovered her smile and physically urged him to keep moving forwards.
He gave her a full smile, questioning her suspicion through his teeth. “What have you seen?”

Darcy shrugged out from under his arm, taking his hand was they walked. In the process, she managed a quick glance over their shoulders. “We’re being followed,” she said keeping a steady grin. “Two men behind us, three across the street, one walking towards us from a block away. Do you see?”

Loki did see, eventually. “How did you catch that so fast?”

Darcy giggled falsely, pointing towards a building, indicating that they should turn the corner. Loki did so and he imagined that they might look like a couple rather than friends. He found that idea strangely funny and he wondered how Darcy felt about it. Now was not the time to ask. “Loki, attention to detail is basically my life. Seriously, it’s my job. Oh my god.”

Her face slacked for a moment and Loki fought the urge to roll his eyes. Darcy was good at seeing things, but her face always revealed the truth. He feigned concern, covering her blunder by bringing the back of her hand to his lips, pretending that she’d hurt it.

She smirked at him as he kissed her knuckles. “There are more up there. We won’t be able to get out of this. How did they know it was us so quickly?”

Loki shook his head, keeping his eyes away from the throng of people. “We were the only ones in the library. They had ten minutes to figure out where it came from. The Triskelion is only half of a mile west from where we stand.”

Darcy let her forehead fall against Loki’s chest. “I didn’t really want to be arrested today. I actually like being alive, did you know that?”

Patting her back reassuringly, Loki suppressed a laugh. “Quit being dramatic, Darcy. The man approaching us from my right, your left, is SHIELD, he has a badge and is pulling it out of his coat, no doubt preparing to show it to us if need be. They have no proof that we did anything. They have no reason to take us but suspicion. You have no reason to tell them anything.”

She snorted. “As if I didn’t know my own rights.”

“Excuse me, children.” Interrupted a cool male voice. “I’m going to have to ask you to come with us for some questioning.”

Loki shot Darcy a warning look that clearly said, ‘Do not kill the man for referring to us as children.’

Thankfully, Darcy got the message and was looking up at the man with wide, seemingly innocent eyes. “I don’t want to be kidnapped.”

The man pulled out his card as Loki had predicted and showed it to Darcy. “I’m one of the good guys. We just want to ask you a few questions.”

Loki thought this would be a rather fantastic opportunity. Being questioned always entailed that someone had to communicate with them. And if it was someone who knew something, Loki was sure they could wean out some information.

Darcy’s mouth clearly had other plans as it was finding a way, once again, to ruin everything in just a few short words. “Why don’t you just ask me here?”

The man answered calmly, but it was obvious that he was losing his patience quickly. “Because the
questions we have to ask are very important.” A sleek black SUV pulled up to the curb and the man opened the car door, gesturing for them to get inside.

Darcy frowned. “I’ve been warned about kidnapping. And this looks like kidnapping. Why do you want to question us?”

Loki squeezed her hand, not speaking. Not yet. While he was rather wonderful at getting his way through words, part of the magic in speaking was making your words important enough to be heard. He could not establish himself as Darcy’s negotiator immediately.

She would be the resilient annoying one. Any questions they gave Darcy would be turned away with a ridiculous amount of sass. And when they had enough, anything he could say to them would be a blessing.

Darcy looked up at him to see the plan brewing in his eyes, his face neatly composed to the rest of the public. She turned to the now irritated man holding the car door open. “One moment please.”

Loki turned them around so their backs were to the men. Darcy spoke in a voice low enough so they wouldn’t be able to tell that she had switched dialects. She scolded him in the language of the Light Elves. “Loki, I am not lying to government officials!”

“Good. You’re a terrible liar,” he responded in kind. “I will do the lying. Do what you can with the truth. Avoid answering if you can.”

She snorted and the SHIELD agent behind them cleared his throat. “Break up your little conversation. If you don’t come now, I won’t ask nicely again. Get your asses in the car.”

Darcy glowered up at the man. “Do you kiss your mom with that mouth?”

Loki elbowed her in the ribs. He’d like to make it to the Triskelion without fighting off trained men with guns.

Before the man could say anything, Darcy sighed, getting in the car and throwing her hands in the air. “Fine. We’ll go, but only if I get candy, food, or puppies. I’m not getting kidnapped without one of the three.”

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Hel had been following the two pesky little animals for hours.

She had been following them for hours because they had not stopped running/slithering at full speed for hours.

Which meant that she, Hel, horse to Lady Darcy and her Prince Loki, must follow around these two tiny creatures just to make sure they did not get themselves hurt.

It was a trying task. One might think that a dog would have enough common sense not to bark at a bilgesnipe four times its size. One might also think that an infinite serpent would have enough instinctual knowledge not to provoke said bilgesnipe (and its friends) further. But no. They disturbed a herd of bilgesnipe.

They could not settle for a singular bilgesnipe; what a silly notion. No, they had to go and incite the entire herd.

Idiots.
She should have let them be eaten. She really should have. Fenrir and Frank could have had a frolicking time, chasing, and being chased by, smelly beasts around the Asgardian countryside. But she didn’t let them. No, Hel was a worthy horse to a prince and she was not going to disrespect him or his lady by letting wild animals eat their pets.

That, and, though she hated to admit it, she did care a great deal for these ridiculous little things. She would hate for them to be gone from her.

Hel huffed, galloping bitterly after the two scoundrels. They were running through a field now. A very large, very empty field. It was strange to Hel that a field such as this could be as empty as it was. The ground was fertile and the water nearby was rich with minerals. She sensed about her being, an air of magic.

Hel thought this was strange until she realized where they were. Based on the location of the nearest mountain range and the position of the rising moons, she decided they were near the border of Nornheim.

It made sense to her now, why there would be no inhabitants of the field. Norns hated magic. Well, most Norns anyways.

Her bones clicked as the ground beneath her hooves became more solid. A short distance ahead of her, Frank threw himself into a thicket of trees.

Hel was about to be furious. If she had to follow both of these outrageous little cretins through another obstacle, she was going to bite them in two.

Fenrir’s tongue lolled in a way that meant there was either food or trouble awaiting him. Hel was prepared to think it was the latter.

Flicking her tail, she gathered her pride. She was Hel. She could do anything. Anything included looking after these miserable diminutive beasts and dealing with their…shenanigans.

She would take them by their scruffs and drag them through the shadows if she had to, but she wasn’t going to let them bother anymore peaceful animals. The nine realms were at rest there was no need to disturb them.

She stomped through the thicket after the two brainless fools, preparing to root her way around wet mud and twining undergrowth. Instead, her hooves found grass.

Hel loved grass. It was soft and comfortable to lie on. The field near the passage to Darcy’s home was her favorite spot. The grass there was the freshest she’d come across. It was safe there and few came to that place.

This grass was very much like that grass. It was damp and clean and was greener than her little prince’s eyes. She was about to bend her neck and taste some of the fine vegetation beneath her when she heard a voice.

It was not the screeching cry of an enraged griffin or the thundering snort of a bilgesnipe. It was a woman’s voice and a very familiar woman’s voice at that.

“Oh! My little wolf! And little serpent! Look at how big you’ve gotten my friends! Oh, come here, let me hold you!”

Hel would recognize that voice anywhere. It was the Apple Lady.
Quickly, she lifted her head from the lovely grass, aware now that she would never put anything from this cursed orchard in her mouth. She looked around, searching for her little animals. She could tell, both by looking at them and the speed at which they ran, that neither were purely just animals any longer. Clearly, magic had played its part on them. Yet, they had seemed to be in good health, so she did not question it.

Now she had no need for her inquiry. Any potential questions she had were answered by their familiarity with the Apple Lady.

She saw them, sitting in the arms of her.

That Apple Lady had an old soul. Hel could see her age like none other. After all, she was the grower of eternity, the distributor of eternal youth. Hel had seen souls age without their bodies and this Apple Lady offended her with her choice to influence fear of death.

A fruit that makes you live forever all in exchange for a price of her asking.

And who would want to die when they could live forever?

Hel did not like those who feared death. She found them weak. Cowardice. Death was no more to fear than life, especially since the two had so very much to do with each other.

That’s why she liked Darcy and Loki. Neither feared death. Neither feared life. They had taken both under their wings and accepted them as friends. Lady Darcy and her prince were the only kind of people that Hel thought should treat themselves to one of the Apple Lady’s disastrous fruits.

She saw from a distance the foretold orchard that consisted of three trees set in a field of sweet grass. Golden apples swung alluringly from the delicate branches of their trees. They were round and budding from the dying petals of their past blossoms. It warmed Hel to know that something as natural as time and proper aging was the only thing to make those magic fruits ripen. From budding seed to luscious blossom, the fruit would come in time.

In the back of the orchard, settled amongst the trees was a white house, crafted from fine stone and earthen metals. It looked very much like a glorified Asgardian farm house. Sitting on the stairs leading up to a wide balcony on the second floor was the Apple Lady looking as youthful as ever she was with her black hair, magical aura, and elderly soul.

Cradled in her arms were the troublemakers that Hel was convinced had no brains. Frank and Fenrir had only lust for life and no thoughts of death, primal or otherwise. They were strange to Hel. They thought not of their own lives, but rather their happiness and what pleased them. And more often than not, they demonstrated their care for Loki and his Darcy was greater than anything.

It was endearing to Hel how they forgot themselves. As frustrating as they were to look after, she could never hate them. Their immortality meant nothing to them but the ability to run faster. She wondered what it would be like if everyone were to live without that kind of fear.

Hel timidly approached the orchard, stepping beneath the trees. She had come often to spy upon the Apple Lady in order to see what would influence someone to avoid death at such a cost.

In this tiny woman’s case, it was loneliness. Hel found this rather amusing, for it was her creation of the fruit and her experiments that drove her to isolation, and because of it she was forever alone, safeguarding the golden fruits that had become an Asgardian trademark.

Frank and Fenrir were never ones to leave anyone feeling lonely no matter how silly their decisions
Silently, she knelt in the grass, folding her legs beneath her and getting comfortable in the shade of the trees. It was evening, and the setting sun was just visible over the roof of the Apple Lady’s house. She would let Frank and Fenrir visit for a while before she returned them home. The Apple Lady was their friend and she would watch over them from the shadows. An orchard of fear was no place for a horse such as herself.

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“What have we got?” Coulson asked, pacing quickly down one of SHIELD’s many corridors.

It had been a fairly unproductive day. So unproductive that he’d been able to take a lunch break down at the WWII museum. He’d come back, done what needed to be done and was preparing to meet the Director in New York for an update on their most recent security protocols when everything started going downhill.

SHIELD had just faced their largest security breach of all time.

Their main database had been exposed ten minutes before they were able to shut it down. The best they could do in terms of discovering the identity of the culprit was trace the source to a library computer a few blocks from the Triskelion, a library which only three people occupied. The computer used was a public one, linked to a public server. A couple minutes after they shut down the breech, two of the occupants left the library.

Agent Sitwell walked in his wake, answering eagerly. “Two kids. One girl. One boy. They’re in interrogation cell 12.”

Coulson maintained composure. “Children?” He knew it wasn’t uncommon for criminal organizations and SHIELD threats to train children as assets, but setting them in a public library seemed far too risky. Not unless they wanted to be caught.

“Bring around extra security. Clear all personnel under level 5 to the main floor,” he told Sitwell, making a right turn into the interrogation sector of the Triskelion.

Sitwell repeated the instruction urgently into his headpiece and Coulson stepped inside the observation room for interrogation cell 12.

Laptops lined the back wall, each being tended to by an agent. The front of the room was clear, leaving the wide viewing window into the interrogation cell visually clear and accessible.

Each interrogation cell was installed with soundproof walls, a two-way mirror, a plain metal table and two chairs, one for the interrogator and one for the patron.

A third chair had been added for the sake of the two children.

Coulson stared through the observer’s side of the two-way mirror and decided that the two ‘children’ looked more like adolescents.

He noticed the girl first, mainly because she was the one talking. Blue eyes. Brown hair. Height… around 158 centimeters. There was no interrogator and the boy didn’t seem to be paying her any mind, but she was talking sulkily, none the less, about what kind of puppies she expected her ‘kidnappers’ to give her. It was a strange behavior. She didn’t seem scared in the least, just very… very irritated. It was almost cute. It was a puzzling reaction from anyone taken into SHIELD custody.
The boy was just as enigmatic. Green eyes. Black hair. Height…roughly 170 centimeters. He was slouching, though it did not look entirely improper. If anyone were to ask Coulson to describe the boy’s demeanor, he might have used the word regal because of how proud he looked. He was staring straight at the mirror, thin lips turned up in a positively mischievous smirk.

Coulson was not easily unnerved and he especially wasn’t unnerved by children. But that smirk made him want to order Sitwell to clear out everyone under level 7.

In the next second, the smirk was gone. The boy’s face was as blank and as pale as it probably had ever been.

Sitwell was explaining their situation. “So far, he hasn’t said anything. The girl has done all the talking, but she isn’t saying much.”

“Names?”

Sitwell shook his head. “She adamantly refused to give away any personal information. We confiscated her backpack and everything they had on them. No school ID. No passports. No credit cards. No cellular devices.”

“Did you find any kind of identifying material?” Coulson asked. “Where are their parents?”

“No parents nearby. It’s possible they’re part of a school group, but we don’t know for sure.” Sitwell walked to the center of the room where an empty purple backpack laid, its contents spilled over the table. Three empty snack wrappers, a collection of crumpled museum brochures, a folder, a few creased twenty dollar bills and a glasses case.

Coulson picked up the folder, opening it and finding a sheet of paper that looked like it was torn from a notebook. On it, written in purple ink was a list of museums. He handed the list to Sitwell. “Have someone pull up the security footage from these museums. See what you can find. Has someone run an identity check on these two?”

“No, systems are down.” Sitwell informed him again. “We had enough time to ring up a DNA check with the girl. A bit of hair was caught in her glasses.” He picked up the glasses case, opening it to reveal a pair of black rimmed spectacles. “We couldn’t find anything. But that isn’t uncommon with children. They could be anyone.”

Coulson spoke evenly, mentally running through his options. “Get me the footage from these museums. Go to the buildings and ask them in person if you have to.” He looked to the three people in the back of the room who were typing furiously at the computers, trying to get systems up and running. “The priority right now is to figure out how are firewall was breached, who breached it and why.”

There was a flurry of busy sounds while agents hurried to fulfill his orders.

“Agent Sohil.” Coulson addressed the tall dark haired woman in the corner of the room. She was leaning over another agent’s shoulder, rapidly whispering instruction.

“Sir,” she replied, standing up straight.

He folded his hands in front of him. “You are head of Interrogation. Get someone to question them.”

Agent Sohil nodded, stepping forwards. “I thought I might do it, Agent Coulson. They’re children. The rest of the interrogators I have in state are men.”
Coulson gave her a questioning glance.

She held her hands up defensively. “It’s nothing personal. It’s proven that children are more willing to cooperate when faced with women rather than men. Scare tactics would seem…immoral with children.”

He nodded his consent. He was no stranger to interrogations. High pressure situations called for someone who could wean information from the toughest of mouths while maintaining as much patience as possible. He had little experience with adolescents and these ones seemed especially tricky.

So, he and the rest of the SHIELD agents of Interrogation cell 12’s observation room stood by while Agent Sohil stepped into the room.

Coulson watched them through the mirror; their voices were projected through a speaker in the ceiling.

“Can you tell me your name, sweetheart?” Agent Sohil asked kindly.

The girl scowled at being referred to as such. “Can you tell me your name, Woman-who-did-not-bring-me-a-puppy?”

Agent Grey smiled in good humor. “I am Agent Hamida Sohil.”

The girl crossed her arms. “How do I know you’re not lying? This place is full of liars. You look like a liar. And believe me I know what a liar looks like when I see one.”

Agent Sohil kept her face complacent, showing the girl her SHIELD ID card. Coulson noted that the boy was not even paying attention to the conversation. He simply sat in his chair, staring thoughtfully at his reflection in the two sided mirror.

The girl smiled at the card. “Ooo, look at you. Level 5. That must be nice. The guy that picked us up was only a level 2. He was a tool.”

Agent Sohil offered a friendly laugh, one the girl seemed to take personal offense to. “What made him qualify as a tool?”

The girl tapped her chin in mock-confusion, cocking her head to the side. “Gee, I don’t know. Maybe it was the part where he kidnapped me and then put me in this room with no food, candies, or puppies!”

She huffed, propping her chin on her hand, her lips forming a rather charming pout. Coulson had no doubts that she was a teenager. Sarcasm was hardly used by anyone under the age of ten.

The conversation went on like that for a while. Sohil would ask a question, the girl would answer with a complaint about her lack of food, candies, and puppies and the boy would say nothing.

Coulson was about to call Sohil back inside when Agent Hill entered the room, gaze focused. “Agent Coulson.”

“Agent Hill,” he greeted tersely. “Any word from Fury?”

“He wants to know what happened.”

He gritted his teeth. They didn’t have much to show for yet. “I don’t have much to report yet.”
Just then, Sitwell spoke up. “Agent Coulson, sir. The guys on floor ten have just discovered something.” He stepped closer once he had Coulson and Hill’s attention. “There’s a third party. Whoever hacked SHIELD, they only used that library computer as a passage. The source was from another location altogether.”

That changed things. It made these children either very valuable or a complete waste of time. It was possible they were working for someone, hired to sit by the library computer to make sure the security breach was executed properly. Or they could have just coincidentally been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Hill focused her attention on the children being interrogated. “They aren’t scared. She’s going on about being kidnapped, but she isn’t scared.”

“She’s been that way since they brought her in,” Coulson explained. “She’s either very brave or very stupid.”

“Or very smart,” Hill muttered. “It could be a defensive technique. Flippancy. Sarcasm. It’s all deflection.”

Coulson noted this, keeping a point system in his head over who these adolescents could be. Lack of fear vouched for them being part of a SHIELD threat. Lack of control and overall absurdity went to ‘just kids’.

Hill held her chin in one hand, gesturing between the two children with her other. “What’s their relationship?”

“I’m assuming friends,” Coulson said. “The Agents that brought them in said that they were talking before they picked them up. They seemed pretty close. They said it was possible they’re romantically involved, but they seem a bit young for that.”

Hill shrugged. “Kids are dating younger nowadays.”

“Yes, but not this young. They can’t be any older than twelve or thirteen,” he guessed, judging by their height and general pubescent looks.

“Alright. We’ll go with friends for now,” Hill agreed, narrowing her eyes as the girl commented on the dust in the air and how she needed her inhaler. “She’s asthmatic?”

Coulson considered it for a moment. “What asthmatic kid goes walking around outside in the spring without their inhaler?”

“One who forgets their inhaler?” Hill suggested obviously.

Coulson narrowed his eyes watching as the boy’s gaze flicked from the mirror to Agent Sohil. “No. They’re communicating. He didn’t stop staring at the mirror until she said that.” He turned to the other agents in the room. “Have there been any repairs on interrogation cell 12? Any repairs anywhere in the Triskelion?”

Sitwell nodded. “A new research facility was installed three floors up. But she wouldn’t be able to smell dust from down here, would she?”

“She wouldn’t need to,” he said, mostly to himself. He consulted the members of the observation room. “Has Agent Sohil been to the research facilitation floors today?”

One of the Agents spoke up. “She has a friend on that floor. Agent Davis. They eat lunch together.”
Hill raised a brow. “You think she’s onto something?”

“I know she’s onto something, whether she realizes she is or not,” he answered, listening as Agent Sohil underestimated her snarky occupant.

“…SHIELD doesn’t kidnap children—“

The girl snorted loudly, bursting into a fit of laughter that turned her pale cheeks bright pink. “That’s a good one!”

Agent Sohil repressed a sigh. “As I was saying, SHIELD does not kidnap children. It is our job to protect—“

The girl groaned. “Yeah yeah yeah, like I care. You and your creepy white interrogation rooms. This metal chair that makes my butt hurt. What’s next? Creepy research labs with frog brains floating around in little test tubes? Or do you use the brains of all the kids you kidnap!?"

Agent Sohil manage to contain her growing impatience. “Our research labs focus strictly on biochemical solutions to impending threats. We—“

“Gross! I don’t want to know about your bio-kamikaze whatever. That sounds like science. And math. Nasty. Sheesh. Besides, in a place like this, I bet the only thing you really research are new ways to kill all of your kidnapped children. What is it? Ray-guns? Lasers? Super secret underground torture chambers? Do you have frozen people in your basement? I bet you do!” the girl accused, backing her chair away from the table and looking at Agent Sohil with repugnance.

“You can’t freeze me in SHIELD’s basements! Or use me to test your super charge weapons!”

Agent Sohil stared at her for a moment, wide eyed, speech halted. She swallowed after a moment, regaining her speech. “Do you even know what SHIELD is?”

“Duh. Of course!” the girl answered snootily, her tone not far from humored.

Agent Sohil didn’t even begin to look hopeful. “Do you know what SHIELD does?”

The girl shifted in her seat so she was sitting on an ankle. “I think everyone knows what a shield does.”

“Not ‘a’ shield. SHIELD—“

“Like Captain America’s shield!” She exclaimed, disposition changing from moody to enthusiastic in a matter of seconds. She smiled widely, as if struck with a new idea and jumped up to stand on her chair. “When Captain America throws his mighty shield, All those who choose to oppose his shield must yield! If he’s dead to a fight and a duel is due, Then the red and the white and the blue’l come through! When Captain America throws his mighty shield!” The girl sang loud, clear and very off key.

Coulson flinched at the sound, though felt an extreme amount of satisfaction in knowing kids still looked to Captain America as their hero. Or, at least, knew of him enough to learn his theme song. “Get Sohil out of there. They definitely know more than they’re letting on.”

Sitwell spoke into his headpiece, telling Agent Sohil to report back to the observation room. She excused herself, walking back into the room. She frowned at Coulson. “I don’t think scare tactics would work on these two. I could call someone in. That didn’t go nearly as well as I’d hoped.”

Coulson adjusted his tie. “No need. I’m going to speak with them. Hill, observe what you can, fill
Coulson walked into the interrogation cell considering the boy rather than the girl. She was the mouthpiece, and a great one at that. She was fairly good at extracting information. But the fact that she was relaying it to the boy meant something. It meant he had a different skill set than her.

But what was it? What did they know?

Coulson reviewed his options.

He could ask the girl first and foremost where she got her training, who she worked for, what she did. But Agent Sohil had already asked the straightforward questions and got played like a deck of cards. No, he was going to have to keep up with this girl.

Taking even steps, he made his way to the side of the table, his back to the mirror, his gaze focused on the adolescents. “You’ve caused quite a bit of trouble for us.”

The girl looked relieved and she exhaled deeply. “Oh good. I didn’t want this to be one of those easy kidnappings.”

Coulson ignored her. “My name is Agent Coulson. I’m a level 7 agent at SHIELD.”

The girl looked up at him and cocked her head to the side, a few locks of hair falling over the boy’s shoulder. He didn’t seem to care. “A level 7? Wow. I feel special.”

“I wanted to know, Miss…?”

“You can call me SQ and this is my trusty comrade, HP.”

Coulson didn’t miss a beat. “…Miss SQ…what do you think about equality?”

He doubted SQ and HP were any real names, but it was better to refer to them as that than ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. HP scowled at the mirror and SQ repressed a giggle. “Sorry, Agent Coulson. I think equality is in short supply.”

Coulson continued on, well aware the only reason she was being more cooperative with him was because he was a level 7. He knew more, she was going to get that out of him. And he hadn’t treated her like a child yet.

He pulled up the chair, sitting across from the two of them. “Well, that’s good that you think that because I wanted to offer you a chance at equality between the two of us.”

SQ’s eyebrows shot up into her hairline. “Equality between the kidnapper and the kidnappee. A strange turn of events, lady and gentleman!” She gestured around the room excitedly, nearly hitting HP in the face. “What kind of equality we talking about here? It better not be that lame ‘I answer one question, you answer one question’ thing.”

Coulson gave her a small smile. “Miss SQ that is exactly the kind of equality I was hoping to establish.”

“Oh God….”

“You are a more than capable young lady. I see no reason why we can’t just exchange a few simple questions,” he said calmly.
For the first time since the interrogation began, SQ began to look the slightest bit worried. Coulson made a mental note. She had relied on being underestimated.

She looked him in the eye and scowled. “Stop assuming things about me. I hate it when people do that. You all get the same look. Like you think you know something.” She made a frustrated sound. “Fine. I’ll play your dumb question game. But before we start, we should make some rules.”

“Rules?”

SQ’s blue eyes looked at him incredulously. “Yeah. Rules. You work for the government. You should know what the rules are no matter how many people you kidnap. I like rules. Let’s use them.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Alright. Rules. What do you think they should be?”

She tapped her fingers on the table. “No super personal questions. I don’t know if we’re safe right now or if you want to lock us up in a scary laboratory and feed our limbs to giant spiders.”


She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Are you carrying a weapon?”

He smiled respectfully. “Yes. I am carrying a gun.”

SQ’s eyes got a little wider and she swallowed hard. “Uh…Can you not be?” She cleared her throat. “Carrying a gun I mean. It’s…threatening.”

Coulson shook his head. “It’s meant to be a threat. I will keep my gun.”

She sighed, crossing her legs. “Fine. Will you show it to me, at least?”

Coulson thought about this for a second before lifting his gun from its holster and holding it up where she could see it. SQ squinted, her lips moving especially fast. He was fairly skilled at lip reading, but he couldn’t decipher what she was mouthing. His gaze flicked to HP who was watching SQ’s reflection.

He kept his suspicion secret, waiting a few more seconds before storing his weapon. “Are you ready now, Miss SQ?”

“One sec,” she told him, tapping her toe on the ground, the rubber of her shoe making rapid slapping noises that echoed in the silent room. “What if we lie?”

Coulson folded his hands on the table, wristwatch pressing into the skin of his arm. “I suppose we’ll just have to trust that the other is being honest.”

This time, SQ shot a glance at HP. HP didn’t pay her any mind, continuing to stare straight ahead. Though Coulson did notice a tiny shift in weight so HP was angled slightly more towards SQ. He was comforting her.

“Ladies first.” Coulson nodded for her to start, smiling politely.

SQ mimicked his position, folding her hands on the table. “I’m not a lady right now. I’m just a kid. Ask me a question.”
Her words held more depth and he wondered what they meant. She implied that she was a lady sometimes. That she wasn’t always ‘just a kid’. Coulson believed they were part of an outside organization now. They had let themselves get captured in attempt to gain more information about SHIELD.

“Why were you in DC today, Miss SQ?”

She stared at him. “To visit museums. Why were you in DC today, Agent Coulson?”

“I had work to do here. Checking up on security protocols before heading out on a mission.” He answered this one truthfully, gauging her reaction. She didn’t seem to care much about that, keeping her steely eyes on him. “What are your favorite subjects in school?”

She made a face. “I don’t like any subjects in school. Gross. Ask a better question than that. You get to go again because of how bad a question that was.”

He pressed his lips together. “Do you attend school regularly?”

She rolled her eyes. “Kidnapper Dude numero uno would seriously be better at questioning me than you, Level 7. I just said that I hated every subject. Yes, I attend school regularly. I get two turns now since yours were so lame.”

Coulson decided she wasn’t lying. No matter how sarcastic and brash she was, there were no signs of her being dishonest. That set him back. He assumed she would have had to lie about that. If she attended school regularly it meant she was either homeschooled, which could be done at any point and location, or she attended school at a set location. Either way, she was not the type of asset a criminal organization might have going against SHIELD.

She licked her bottom lip, squinting at him. “Jeez, I’m blind without my glasses. Alright, Agent, time for the big question that your goonies wouldn’t answer: Why are we being questioned?”

SHIELD compromises weren’t something that Coulson typically told the public. And if these kids turned out to be just a part of the public, he couldn’t tell them why. But if they were working for someone, then they knew why they were being questioned.

There were too many variables. He decided to play it safe. “There was a threat that happened near you. We have reason to believe you could be a part of it.”

“You’re all dirty liars,” she slumped heavily in her chair, scrutinizing him through narrowed eyes. After a couple more seconds of this, she threw her hands over her face. She groaned, muttering something under her breath. He couldn’t pick it up, but the microphones around the room were sensitive enough to have discerned it.

“What was that?” he said quietly, touching his earpiece to ask Sitwell.

Hill answered. “We don’t know. It wasn’t English.”

SQ peeked at him from between her fingers. “What was what?”

Coulson felt a bit hopeful at that. Finally they were getting somewhere. “What language was that you were using?” he asked. She would have to lie about this or risk telling him something essential about herself.

She stared at him. “Umm what?”
“The language, you were using, SQ? It wasn’t English.”

She looked panicked for a moment, swallowing her confusion. Coulson acknowledged the fact that she had done this mouthing subconsciously. It was possible English wasn’t her first language. Immediately, his thoughts jumped to Russia. Perhaps the red-room was training them differently now.

“Uh…English?” she said uncertainly.

It was a lie. Coulson saw it now. HP was tensing up as well. He was aware that his friend couldn’t lie. Coulson wondered if HP could speak English well enough to understand their conversation.

He shifted his weight in the metal chair. “It is your turn for a question, SQ.”

She began swinging her legs back and forth, tapping her chin. Coulson took both these actions as ways to give off excess energy. “Did you notice the mistake I made in singing the Captain America theme song?”

That question took him by surprise and it did for her as well. “What makes you ask that?”

She tapped her fingers on the table, sitting kicking the leg of her chair with her heel. She was nervous now. She wasn’t cool and deflective. She wasn’t going on about kidnappers. He could see it. The truth was welling there in her blue eyes. They were far too open for her own good. “Well, I messed up the song. It goes ‘if he’s lead to a fight and a duel is due’. I said ‘If he’s dead to a fight and a duel is due.’ Which doesn’t make much sense if you think about it. I don’t know why I said it that way. “

She paused for a beat and Coulson’s silence seemed to pop the tab on her secret keeping lid.

SQ banged her hands on the table. “Alright, so I know why I said it. It’s because I figured someone around here must know the Captain America theme song. I mean, come on, he’s Captain America and this is SHIELD and the two have a lot in common. And I made that mistake on purpose! I wanted someone to correct me, but no one did. Which I’m a little disappointed in. That line made no sense. Someone should have corrected me, at least for bad grammar.

“But nooo! We just have to send in this baddie!” She gestured wildly to Coulson. “And so, I figured that you must totally know something about Captain America. And then I realized that, of course you would know something about Captain America! You have a vintage set of Captain America trading cards in your gym locker and everyth—”

She stopped talking. She stopped moving. Her face froze. She was the visual description of the phrase, ‘oh shit’.

Coulson thought fast. She knew about his Captain America trading cards? His vintage Captain America trading cards? What else did she know about? Who were these people and why did they know anything about his full set of Captain America trading cards? Furthermore, how did she know that he kept his full set of Captain America vintage trading cards in his gym locker? Did everyone know that he kept them in his gym locker? He was going to move them somewhere else. Like his regular locker. Or he could get a new gym locker…

He prepared to ask SQ another question while she was still shocked. Her walls had been knocked down; it was the perfect time to get everything from her. That’s when a cool, level voice spoke to him.

“Enough. I tire of this ‘game’.”
Coulson turned his attention to HP and SQ visibly relaxed.

The boy no longer looked quite so bored. In fact, he seemed intrigued. His green eyes set on Coulson with near impish inquiry.

“You speak English.” Coulson addressed him unperturbed. “I was beginning to wonder.”

HP smirked and Coulson saw once again that he was prideful and arrogant. But like his friend, he was not an idiot. And something told Coulson that HP was a much better liar than a deflector. Different skill sets.

“I do not care what goes on inside your head except that which permits us to leave. You have had your fun questioning us. Allow me to remind you, Agent Coulson, that you are holding two minors in custody with no warrant and for no reason other than speculation. My friend and I agreed to answer your questions under the prospect that we would receive nourishment, reward, or some form of entertainment.”

SQ nodded in agreement. “That’s fancy talk for ‘food, candies, and puppies’.”

“I’m aware,” Coulson told her with near overbearing politeness. “HP—“

SQ snorted a laugh, motioning for him to keep talking. HP cast his ‘friend’ a wary sideways glance.

“—are you saying that we are keeping you here under false pretenses?”

“No,” HP said simply. “Though I did imply it. You have given no true reason why you are keeping us here other than the fact that there has been a threat. You have only said that you needed to see us for questioning. You have flashed your silly plastic cards, given us names, and locked us in a room for almost four hours now. You will forgive my friend for being defensive.”

“Defensive?” Coulson inquired lightly. “She has demonstrated knowledge that is far past the line of defense.”

“Has she?” HP questioned, one narrow black brow raised. It accentuated the sharp cut of his cheekbones, still slightly obscured by pre-adolescent chub. “Has she really? Or have those just been assumptions on your part?”

His words were very easy to listen to. They were smooth and very…nice. They were hard to describe, but Coulson wanted to believe what he was saying. Whatever it was, his voice made it sound appealing. The thought of SHIELD and the good of the world brought him back to his reasons for their ulterior motives. “She was deflecting, using defense mechanisms in order to encourage SHIELD agents to divulge information. She irritated one of our best interrogation officers to near breaking point and communicated with you using another language.”

HP scoffed. “Listen to yourself, Agent. Believe it or not, being kidnapped by government agencies is not the most pleasant experience. A defense mechanism would not be out of place in order to protect that which she holds dear. We do not know if you wish to hurt us. Your paranoia precedes your sense. As for berating Agent Sohil…well…being annoying is a natural born talent. You will have to forgive her.”

Coulson wanted to block his words. They made sense. But it was his job to be paranoid. He kept his face composed. He was unflappable, no matter the circumstance. “You didn’t explain the language.”
HP leaned forwards. “Agent Coulson, you are still not listening.” His green eyes flashed and there was something…inhuman about them. Something otherworldly. “We wish to leave now. We have nothing to tell you. We still do not know what you wanted from us. You have asked who we work for, and my friend has answered that we do not work for anyone.”

Sitwell’s voice sounded in his ear. “Sir, it’s your call. But you have to admit, the kid has a point.”

Coulson could feel there wasn’t something right. However, Sitwell was right. The kid did have a point. He couldn’t keep them much longer.

There was still one thing that bothered him though. “You haven’t denied anything.”

The corner of HP’s mouth came up in a smirk. “No. It was—“


SQ opened her mouth to say something, but her words were impeded by one of HP’s hands coming to rest on her arm. “Ask me a simple question, Agent. Ask me something you want to know in as basic a manner as possible and I will answer it in kind.”

Coulson stared at the boy for a long time. He was dangerous. His glare was a challenge and a threat all in one.

The agent sat up straighter in his chair. This is how it would be, then. “Did you play any part in hacking into SHIELD’s database?”

SQ’s eyes widened just a bit and she looked to her friend. For the first time since he entered the interrogation cell, HP looked dead-serious and answered one cold, meaningful word. “No.”

A moment of silence passed.

Then another.

No one in the observation room spoke.

No one needed to.

Finally, SQ stood up, clapping her hands together cheerily. “Ah, well, this has been fun, Agent C, but I think it’s high time we blow this popsicle stand.”

HP stood up as well, looking expectantly to Coulson.

“There’s one more thing…” The girl tapped her chin cynically. “Oh yeah, I expect at least five bucks for some Taco Bell since I didn’t even get a puppy out of this whole ordeal. Worst. Kidnappers. Ever.”

***

Loki was on his sixth or seventh taco and he still didn’t know how he felt about this ‘Taco Bell’ establishment. Sure it tasted decent, but the quality was far from that of even Asgard’s stingiest taverns. Not that he would know. He tended not to seek entertainment from those parts. Perhaps he would try. Darcy took trips there on occasion to go and associate with the lower class. She said it helped her get a better idea of what laws needed to be amended.

She sat across from him now, giggling as she sipped her coke. “Loki, when did we get so cool?”
He set down his food, wiping his hands on a paper napkin. “When did you decide it was a good idea to use our ‘code names’ in this situation? I refuse to be ‘Horn Prince’ any longer. Prince, yes, that is acceptable. ‘Horns’ are a bit redolent.”

Darcy sniggered. “Fine. How about ‘Trickster Prince’? You could be TP.”

“Again, I wonder what cruel fate lead me to having you as my companion and have to tolerate such childish humor.” He sighed, unwrapping another taco and ripping open a condiment packet.

Darcy laughed again, sitting back in her booth and setting her feet up on the space beside him. “Easy on the tacos, TP. If your royal bowel is messed up tomorrow, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He ignored her, continuing to eat. Midgardians were so puny sometimes. He used so much of his energy that he needed the extra calories to function. Mortals didn’t. Even exercising, Darcy didn’t use as much energy as he did practicing magic. Volstagg teased her often for how little she ate. Comparatively, one Asgardian serving was four or five times that of a Midgardian’s.

She yawned, patting her stomach. “Are you sure you wiped everything from their systems?”

He sneered at the spicy sauce he’d just covered his food in. “Yes, I am sure. Their surveillance didn’t get one good look at us. I made sure to clear us from the museum footage as well. They have nothing that will allow them to trace us.”

Darcy pursed her lips for a moment, opening her backpack and taking out her glasses. “Alright.” She relented. “You enjoyed yourself a bit too much in there.”

They shared a look of understanding while Loki slowed his chewing. She wasn’t wrong. Intimidating SHIELD agents, running his magic through their security, confusing them with Darcy at his side…it was quite possibly the most fun he’d ever had.

It was a challenge, but not so much of a challenge that he didn’t enjoy it. Darcy did what she did best, paying attention to detail. She managed to get quite a bit out of the first level 2 agents that interrogated them. It hadn’t been a true interrogation. They just asked for their names, where their parents were, if they knew why they were there, etc. etc.

Darcy spoke the entire time and she figured that the level 2 agents knew nothing about HYDRA or SHIELD. Then the level 5 agent came in. That is where the fun truly started. She was the next of many to underestimate Darcy Lewis. And Darcy had talked and chattered and spat deduced suppositions at the poor woman until she could start relaying over the right information to Loki.

A new research lab three floors up. Past people she’d interviewed. What kind of threats SHIELD dealt with. For some reason she seemed to think that ‘frozen people in their basements’ was somehow plausible. He disagreed.

It was an effective method for Darcy, to play the agents as a loud, silly little girl who spoke everything that came into her head. He found that tactic strange for her. It was useful, but strange.

In court, Darcy was always so forward. Lords and Ladies would fail to take her seriously and she would prove them wrong as soon as she got her opportunity. Seeing her today was…different. She hadn’t lied, but she hadn’t been honest either. It was just enough mischief to cause a little mayhem.

“Darcy?”

“Sup?” she replied, not looking up from writing in her notebook that he had magically returned from her bedroom for her.
He finished his last taco and started on his drink. “When you said you weren’t going to lie, I expected you to be a bit less…” he searched for the right word, “…ambiguous.”

She licked her lips, setting down her pen, avoiding eye contact. “Yeah. Me too.”

Concern battered at his heart and he leaned across the table to take her hand. “Darcy? What is wrong?”

Finally, she looked up at him, a tinge of sauciness brewing in her eyes. “I’m trying to find an answer to your implied question.”

Worry abandoned him, rolling away in small waves. “And what was my implied question?”

She rubbed her eye with the hand he wasn’t holding. “Why I acted as I did.”

He nodded, releasing her hand as she slumped in her booth. “Frigga told me during one of our lessons that sometimes your methods would work better than mine and sometimes my methods would work better than yours. I think she was teaching me about the dangers of consistency or, at least, how to be effective in getting what I need.”

Loki gazed at her for a long moment. “Did it upset you? Using, as you put it, my methods?”

“No,” she answered immediately. “It didn’t.”

Loki frowned. It should not bother him that Darcy lied. Why would it? She was clever and she had her rights to do whatever she saw fit. But her dumb facade had reminded him too strongly of those who belittled her in court. She would not back down to them because she was their equal. If Darcy planned to one day be a diplomatic leader of the United States, then he did not think it would be wise for her to lie as such. For they would one day be her colleagues and followers and they should not look down upon Darcy Lewis. He took her hand again, running his thumb over her knuckles. “It was a worthy plan, darcy. One that you executed perfectly.” he paused. ”But I do not think you should try it again. You are not the one who is called 'liar'."

Darcy considered this for a long moment, the dark crescents under her eyes adding intensity to her stare. “I suppose not.” she agreed at last, squeezing his hand in return.

He felt his lips tug into a smile. Sitting up straighter, he focused on what she was writing. “Let’s review what we have on the Tesseract before I take you back to the hotel. Your double is at rest, as is the rest of your class.”

She returned his grin, pushing up her glasses and reading her notes. “Coulson, level 7 SHIELD agent. It’s clear why he had his job. He was good.”

“A proper challenge,” Loki agreed, motioning for her to continue.

Darcy scratched her brow with the tip of her pen, leaving an inky scribble there. “I couldn’t tell much of anything about him. He didn’t even flinch at the mention of weapons. He had the same standard SHIELD issue gun as the level 2s.” She flipped back a couple pages. “I did get a good look at his hands though.”

Loki nodded, recalling what she had mouthed to him in his native tongue. “Yes, I remember. You said something about them being ‘too clean’.

“Yeah,” she said offhandedly, running a finger over her notes. While she had been thinking through everything about Agent Coulson, Loki had been making sure all of SHIELD’s systems stayed
inactive while monitoring what was being said through their little communication devices. They were oblivious.

“His hands were too clean. They were dry across the back. I wouldn’t really think a lot on it, except that it isn’t winter. It’s summer, which means he washed his hands a lot today,” she said knowingly. “And his palms weren’t that dry which means he uses lotion. But non-scented lotion. I couldn’t smell anything.”

Loki shook his head. “Darcy, that has nothing to do with the Tesseract. What could that possibly have to do with the Tesseract?”

She shrugged, holding her hands up to indicate bewilderment. “I have no freaking idea. But it has to mean something! Why were his hands so clean? The other agent’s hands weren’t that clean.”

“Darcy, that is too far off track. We cannot draw sensible conclusions from Agent Coulson having clean hands. Did you get anything else?”

She huffed, bitterly scratching down a few more things in the margins of a filled page. “Yeah. He can read lips well enough to tell that I hadn’t spoken to you in English. That takes practice.”

“Or it could have just been an assumption,” Loki argued, not seeing how any of this was relevant.

Darcy tapped her temple, glaring at him through mystified eyes. “No. It wouldn’t have been an assumption. I doubt Coulson would make that kind of accusation without having decent reasoning. He was a sharp guy, Loki. I know you like to think that no one in Yggdrasil could possibly be smarter than us, but just try for a second. Okay?”

He frowned and she continued. “Language is patterned, unlike gibberish which is plainly chaotic. Language has structure and he must have taken note of that.”

“Darcy Lewis, we are not trying to discover everything we can about Agent Coulson, we are trying to find an infinity stone,” Loki reminded her in a whisper.

She stuck her tongue out at him, balling up empty taco wrappings. “Fiiine. I’m just telling you what I got off of him.” Taking a sip of his drink, she turned her attention back to her notebook. “He’s a big fan of Captain America.”

Loki gave her a curious look. “I am still confused about this part. How did you know about his vintage Captain America trading cards?”

She shrugged. “I overheard him talking to a security guard about them at the Captain America exhibit earlier today. I didn’t think they were the same people. I mean, I suspected, but I didn’t think I was right or anything. The trading card thing just kinda spilled out.”

He pursed his lips. “You were speaking impulsively again.”

“Bad habit,” she sassed, sucking down the rest of his soda as revenge.

“You are going to have a difficult time sleeping now,” Loki commented. “Two drinks. You will be up half the night.”

She handed him back his cup. “Yeah, well, you’re going to be up with much worse than that, my friend. If I were you, I would invest in some baby wipes or a bidet.”

He sincerely doubted her. He was Asgardian. His digestive system was of a much stronger
constitution than a mortal’s. He brought them back to the matter at hand. “So, Captain America?”

She stared at her notes for a few seconds, cupping her chin in her linked fingers. “I don’t think modern SHIELD knows anything.”

“Darcy—“

“They don’t!” Darcy insisted, gesturing to her notes. “I’m telling you, they don’t. They know there was a break in, but they weren’t concerned about what we looked at, they were only upset that someone had broken in. Coulson didn’t care that I messed up the Captain America theme song and I just don’t think they have anything to do with it. The level 5 agent was more helpful than the level 7 agent.”

He laid his hands flat on the cheap plastic table top in front of him. “Darcy, they must know something.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t think they do. It wasn’t in their database, I doubt it’s common knowledge amongst agents. But there was something weird about Agent Sohil. Did you see the sheer amount of dread on her face when I mentioned frozen people in the basement?”

Loki looked to her in disbelief. “No. No, I think you are confusing dread with annoyance.”

Her full lips pouted and Loki found her irritation rather endearing. “Loki, there’s a big possibility with the frozen people thing. Or at least some frozen things.”

“Now you are talking nonsense. Besides, she would have alerted Coulson or another agent if you had struck anything of importance to SHIELD.”

She looked like she was forming a rebuttal, and then changed her mind. “Yeah. You got me there.”

With heavy limbs, Darcy slid out of her booth. “Come on, Lokes. Let’s call it a night. I need sleep more than my double.”

Together, they threw away their trash, leaving the Taco Bell and walking down an empty alley. By the time they reached the end, Loki had teleported them back to Darcy’s hotel. He bid her goodbye at the door, promising to see her the next day at noon.

That night, he slept in Darcy’s bed without her, Jörmungandr and Fenrir curled up at his side. And Loki knew, as he struggled to sleep with his angrily churning gut, that this summer was going to be their most productive one yet.

Chapter End Notes

*that embarrassing moment when it's been far too long since your last update and you scared to make eye contact with anyone who just read it*
OKAY! I DID IT! IT MIGHT BE THE SIZE OF A SMALL NOVEL, BUT I DID IT AND IT’S HERE. UGGGGGGGGGGGGGH HH.

Alright, so I just wanna say a few things about this chapter. First, I wanna talk about Sigyn. I’m going to tell you straight up that Sif/Sigyn will be a thing. Just so you know. Sigyn is only 13 right now. She’s got time to play the field before bringing it back to home. (Okay, pretend not to know a whole lot about baseball so that my analogy makes sense.) I’ve been playing around with Sigyn’s sexuality because…I can. Yeah. Obviously, she isn’t a big fan of men. BUT she does have the hots for Loki. It may or may not be because he looks a little bit like the dude version of Sif and she has the hots for Sif even though she won’t admit it to herself (yet).

Time to address the thing: I have been getting numerous complaints/criticism/inquiries as to where the Hel Darcy’s childhood life is. "Her Parents?" "Friends?" "School?" I am not ignorantly oblivious to the lack of answers to those questions in the fic. I have reasons and I’m going to tell them to you because I think it’s important. I have decided that I need a chapter dedicated to Darcy’s life outside of Loki. It will happen. Also, the majority of the story is told from Loki’s perspective. Now, Loki knows that Darcy is Midgardian. He sees that daily. But what he doesn’t see as much as when he was a kid is Darcy’s relationships to the outside world. I know that, from a reader’s standpoint, it’s weird not to have a 13 year old girl talk about her family and friends, but she separates the two. As of now, I’ve not written a whole bunch about Darcy outside of Asgard/Loki because most of it is written from Lokie perspective and because Loki does not like to think that there is any part of Darcy’s life that will keep her from living on asgard.

I realize now that there are some flaws in going about this. I planned for the next chapter to be taken up by quite a few of Darcy’s moments on Midgard. I be live it might be more real to you guys if I at least have Darcy mention her parents in passing. I might go through and make some edits. Please just know that I am not intentionally trying to insult the fanfiction community with my lack of childhood moments on Midgard. There’s just a lot of plot to establish. It’ll come in time. I’ll make some adjustments to what I write.

Next: You may be asking yourself "Why did Q have to make this all one big chapter?" or "Why did Q choose to shove a small book into a single chapter?" Allow me to sate your curiosity.
I, as a fanfiction writer, feel like I have a certain duty to make each chapter like a tiny adventure. And in those tiny adventures, I poke in bits of an on-going plot. I weave in bits of important stuff that I need for later chapters and stuff. In the past, I have split up adventures into two chapters, but it felt very wrong with this one. I had a very strong urge to keep all the SHIELD shit together. Because it is my intention to both speed up the plot and keep all of the important things grouped.

SHIELD, this far into TGUMB, is a variable. I equated it into my fanfic equation, then cancelled it out. I needed to introduce them, but the gap between the two chapters (If I were to make this two chapters) I thought would give too much of a break and time to dwell on SHIELD potentials. I had a clear idea of what I need SHIELD to be there for while still maintaining necessary character development and...shit.

Wow. Alright. That's hella embarrassing because you just saw all of the gross inner workings of my brain that may or may not make any sense. I felt that was important to say. if you have any questions, please ask.

ONE LAST THING. In CA:TWS, The Captain America exhibit is at the Smithsonian. Darcy and Loki were not at the Smithsonian. This is important to me for some reason. In my head, they move the Captain America exhibit to the Smithsonian after Steve is pulled up from the ice. Thank you. Me and my fangirl reasons are going to shut up now.

Thank you for reading, I seriously love every single damn one of you for your support and love and kudos and...really, you guys are the best. ;P
“Do these jeans make my butt look big?”

Grace turned a studious gaze upon her friend’s rear. “Yeah. Huge.”

Darcy grinned looking over her shoulder to see her reflection in the fitting room mirror. “Awesome. I’m getting these ones.”

The girls laughed together, rifling through their collection of clothes they hauled into the changing rooms. It was August and school was due to start anytime now. Darcy and Grace had agreed that they wanted to really define their style. Or, at least start wearing things other than gym shorts all the time.

Darcy was hard to separate from her love of jeans. But Grace convinced her to at least try some skirts. A few long ones, a few shorter ones. She decided on one of each.

Grace was much more style oriented and Darcy was impressed on how everything in her closet seemed to go together. Darcy would even venture to say that Grace was worse than Loki when it came to matching things. She coordinated her hair wrap with her bed sheets. That took skill in Darcy’s book.

Grace sighed, pushing down her hair that was starting to frizz. “I should have put my hair up. Going natural is great, but I think I’m going to change it up before school starts.”

“What were you thinking?” Darcy asked, sliding off her t-shirt in favor of trying on a light-weight sweater. It was comfortable and had a mock turtle-neck. She almost threw it into her ‘yes pile’ before she realized it was dark green. She smirked. Loki already turned enough of her things green; she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of actually purchasing green clothing.

Her socks were green, her pajama bottoms, her sleepshirts, her favorite rain coat…all green. Her mother had inquired to the discoloration and Darcy claimed it must be magic.

“I was thinking braids,” Grace said uncertainly. “Maybe I’ll just get it straightened and keep it that way because of soccer.”

Darcy thought about this for a moment, absentmindedly adjusting her bra. “Yeah. Braids would be cool, but straight might be easier.”

“That is if we even make the team,” Grace snorted. “I mean, look at us! Two freshman girls! So young! So green! Ready to step out onto the field and not score goals!”

Laughing, Darcy elbowed her friend. “Hey! We’re not that bad. Ashley on the other hand…”
Grace snorted out a rather unattractive chortle, unzipping the casual dress she’d tried on. “I don’t think Ashley is trying out. She says she wants to try cheerleading.”

Darcy nodded in memory, thinking back to the end of the year party her parents had hosted for her soccer team. It had been a picnic/barbeque where all her friends came to sit in her backyard and kick around a ball. Mysteriously, all of the hot dogs had disappeared from the event, leaving everyone with the option of hamburger or veggie burger.

Ashley had set everyone down and made a big deal about how she wasn’t doing soccer in high school. Darcy liked Ashley, no matter how melodramatic she was. But sometimes, Darcy felt like Ashley would fit in all too well with a few of the more passive ladies of the court.

Darcy’s phone vibrated and she checked her texts. “My mom is done shopping for work clothes. She said she’ll meet us at the bookstore. If we want, coffee is on her.”

Grace made a face. “I don’t drink coffee. Caffeine is unhealthy, and it tastes nasty so what’s the point of decaf?”

Darcy acted offended at the bash on coffee. She was starting to drink more of it. Late nights with Loki, coupled with her preparations for High School and duties as an advisor? It was a mess. Not to mention, she had been taking time away from the palace to further explore the capital city of Asgard and walking around all day was seriously taxing.

She often asked Loki if he’d like to accompany her, but he had yet to say yes. Darcy didn’t take it personally. In fact, it would seem very out of character for Loki to agree to willingly go mill about with hundreds of people at a time. He liked mischief and chaos, but he liked it from a distance. Not that he had a problem interacting with people, he just preferred not to.

Darcy was actually a bit confused by her friend. It wasn’t like Loki couldn’t make friends or talk to people. He could, and he was good at it. He had people skills. But he acted…fake.

Charming, yes. Loki, no.

The formality he used when associating with those closest to him was odd. Even with Sigyn he adorned a proper air. It was like a shield used to mask the snarky, mischievous person beneath. Darcy wondered why that was. Maybe he didn’t want friends. Maybe he thought he just didn’t need them.

Loki didn’t like to bring up the parts of his life before he met Darcy that didn’t involve his mother. Going off what she’d gathered from Thor, Loki had always been a loner. Darcy figured as much, but it still made her sad. Loki was introverted. He liked quiet places and magic. He had fun at feasts and tolerated council meetings with minimal mayhem, but he valued their alone time.

Their more relaxing days happened at least thrice a week, when the two of them could sit in comfortable silence and say absolutely nothing. Darcy could almost feel Loki’s peacefulness at these times. As much as he loved scheming, nothing beat an hour or two of tranquility.

The girls got together the items they wanted to buy and Darcy paid for her haul with her mom’s credit card, Grace with hers.

Grace looked sadly down at her card as they walked to the end of the strip mall to a joint independent bookstore and café. “I think I’m, like, two cents away from maxing out. I’ve bought a bagel from that new pastry place everyday this summer.”

Darcy grinned widely. “Dude, bagels are worth it! Did you get the veggie cream cheese?”
“Ew. No. I hate cream cheese,” Grace said as they entered the bookstore.

Darcy gasped in horror, turning her nose up. “We can’t be friends anymore. I officially hate you and everything that you stand for.”

They laughed and Grace gave Darcy a shove as they approached Mrs. Lewis at the small café in the corner of the bookstore. She asked them how shopping went and they showed her their different clothing articles. Mrs. Lewis smiled, checking her phone and saying that they still had time to look at books. She had a shift at the hospital later that day.

Darcy bought a coffee before picking out the books that year’s syllabus said they needed. *Romeo and Juliet. Great Expectations. Remains of the Day.* They all seemed fine, if not a little dull. Grace went to look at the latest teen romance novels that she’d been gushing about and Darcy casually strolled over to the Biographies and Nonfiction.

Usually, her mom would let her buy at least five books of her own choice. Only recently had Darcy learned how expensive her reading habits were. Midgardian textbooks were costly, especially when most she acquired were for college studies. Recently published science journals and stacks of library books she’d become far too attached to let go. The price of her late fees and ‘missing’ books was astronomical. Not to mention, Darcy had a bad habit of ‘borrowing’ books from her mother’s doctor friends.

Technically, it was Loki who did the borrowing and Darcy didn’t harp him too seriously about returning said borrowed books. It wasn’t stealing. She needed those books. For science.

But Darcy’s mom didn’t question the absurd amount of reading material Darcy managed to obtain. Nor did she complain about the cost. Darcy figured that between her reading expenses and the cumulative cost of Darius’ video games and car repair fines (he’d crashed the car twice that year), they were pretty evenly matched.

Darcy picked through the new releases the ‘scientific research’ part of the Nonfiction section. The thing she liked about this particular independent bookstore is that they carried everything. They weren’t partial to one type of book over another. They ordered the books and Darcy was happy to receive them.

Loki particularly liked anything science related. Any scientist that existed in the last century, he wanted to know what they did, why they did it, and how he could use that to his advantage.

From the shelf Darcy found a thicker book about universal expansion and galactic anomalies written by Erik Selvig and co-authored by K.D. Foster. She flipped open the cover and stared appreciatively at their sources then read the blurbs about the authors. Both taught at Culver University. Or at least they had when the book was published last year.

Darcy’s heart fluttered a bit when she thought of Culver.

As fine as it was to learn about political science from a textbook, she felt like she was missing proper instruction. Loki was very good about explaining mathematical things to her, but not politics. He hated politics.

She needed someone who knew what they were doing when it came to Midgardian Political science. She’d done research online and found Culver, one of the best universities in the world to go for political science. That was her motivation for doing well in school.

Homework was despicable, but Culver was pretty. She would do her homework for the sake of
Nearing the end of her walk through the store, she had a small collection of books to take to checkout. The girl at the cash register whose nametag read ‘Susan’ smiled down at her from over the counter. “Hey, glad to see you back! Missed you for a couple weeks.” She chatted friendly and Grace gave Darcy an incredulous look as if to say ‘the people at the bookstore know you, you weirdo.’

Darcy ignored her friend and responded kindly. “Yeah. I was out of it for a while. I figured I should come and pick up books for class and stuff.”

Susan scanned Great Expectations. “Where do you guys go?”

“East,” Grace answered and Susan’s face lit up.

“Oh, hey, I go there! I’m a senior this year. You guys must be coming in as freshman.”

Darcy held out her mom’s credit card again to purchase her books and sucked air in through her teeth dramatically. “Are we that obvious?”

Susan laughed, beginning to get Grace’s books. “Nah. I just saw the books. I had to read the same ones.”

“Makes sense,” Grace said, paying for her books.

Darcy waved goodbye to Susan as they left the shop, trailing being her mom. Grace was chattering about the sleepover at Ashley’s that night. “…seriously, Darce, we haven’t had a sleepover all summer. Just come to this one before the endless void of higher education sucks us in forever!”

Darcy made a face. “Okay okay, fine. I’ll come.” She grimaced, anxiously anticipating a sleepover all the ride home. Not that she minded sleepovers, but it was always a bit of a reminder of how different she was from her friends. They talked about boys and hair care products while Darcy caught up with pop culture. Lord of the Rings marathons and speed reading through the Harry Potter series were all activities reserved for sleepovers. It always gave her something to relate to with her friends. The more references she used, the more Midgardian she felt.

It went without saying there was a lot of mental preparation that went into starting high school and friends helped with that. Besides, she owed herself a break with all she’d accomplished that summer.

Though Darcy refused to call Odin a good man, she could acknowledge he was a decent king. At least, he knew what the hell he was doing sometimes, which was more than half the court. Of course, the rest of the court wasn’t taught to rule a realm by Queen Frigga.

Taxes were in abundance in Asgard. The happier people were, the more taxes went to Asgard’s budget. No wonder everything was so beautiful, the crown was loaded. Odin had so much money coming in from the capital that the sum amount received per season alone was comparable to eight times what the United States and United Kingdom combined brought in every three years if you did the math properly.

Inflation wasn’t necessarily a problem either, as Odin had set a decree to lower the taxes correspondingly to goods sold on the market which were regulated privately as most shopkeepers and merchants bought and sold according to season. They worked amongst themselves with supervision of the court to ensure there was no overproduction of certain goods.
Money went towards the military and training camps. At first, Darcy had a problem with these. The Asgardian Military would accept any man or child who was not an infant. Supposedly they accepted women as well, since Sif was a part of their program. The men would train for a few years, room and board paid for by the crown. It was a good way to keep children off the streets, though homelessness was extremely uncommon in Asgard.

The children would train with their weapon of choice, study fighting to defend their realm, and when they entered adulthood, they would be inducted into the military as warriors.

Extra money went towards funding various projects throughout Asgard. Architectural schools, Sculpting projects, weapons manufacturers, and a great deal of magical collegiums. Darcy was smug about that last one. Even the most uptight Aesir could not live a second on their precious Asgard without somehow being affected by the magical influence. Everything in Asgard was founded off magic and she dearly wished more people would share her understanding. The lower class was extremely sympathetic and accepted magic as an art form. Because of this, more lower class citizens practiced magic, attended the schools, and supported Asgard’s magical demands.

And of course, ninety-three percent of the magicians on Asgard were women. Without them, the realm would fall apart. It pained Darcy that they didn’t get more recognition and for the most part, she blamed Odin. He had developed a well functioning realm that seemed almost perfect when you had a less than ethical moral standpoint. His perspectives were old and they had Darcy waiting by for an Asgardian social-justice revolution.

The lower class was not poor, the middle class was not relied on for the majority of support for the realm, and the higher class was fair and decent to the rest. Each understood their place and since no one was starving or suffering in their position, things seemed fairly equal. However, there were distinct differences Darcy had noticed.

Firstly that the lower class was a whole lot freer than the upper class. They did what they liked, abided by the laws and were typically very laid back peoples. They were not bound by strict social expectations and preferred to do as they pleased.

The most obvious example of this that she had found was sexuality.

Starting high school, Darcy was beginning to see controversial topics more clearly. American Midgardians fought vigorously over who did what with who and how they went about it, the government grasping at control over intimate parts of a relationship for their own morals rather than worldly ethics.

Asgard wasn’t like that. No one in the court would dare even speak about something that happened in the bedchamber, let alone try to make a law about it. To them, it was a topic of conversation better left to the feasting tables where, after a few strong tankards of mead, jokes could be made and humor applied.

It was, however, expected in the upper class that women marry men and make babies to carry on the family bloodline. As long as that happened, no one really cared whose bed they spent their time in. Families married off their sons and daughters early before they became independent enough to feel confident in making their own decisions and denied any husband/wife they were to have.

The lower the class you went, the freer people became. No one had any reason to carry on a bloodline and when you can have eternal youth, forever to have children if you want them and no obligations, there was no rush. If you didn’t want children, there was no need to make them. In fact, marriage was rare in the lower class. If people got married, it was believed that those people were helplessly in love that they would commit themselves to one lover for the rest of their lives.
Darcy had gone to a tavern dressed as a commoner to partake in lower class customs in order to continue her study on social differences rather than classist discrepancies, as there were hardly any besides the amount of money made per century.

A drink in hand, Darcy had observed two men displaying rather passionate affection for one another near the bar. But no one looked twice. In the palace, in ballrooms and dining halls where people wore jewels and signed papers, the mention of two men together would cause outrage. Public display of affection would be shunned.

The rest of Asgard thought nothing of it. They were a bit like extremely calm bohemians who liked to fight with each other and then laugh about it while they bled on the floor.

Darcy often did this; slipping past the watchful eye of the guards to visit the city by herself and gauge from the people their opinion of their realm and its leadership. From the Asgardian public she learned that Odin knew how to make people love the royal family. He and Thor were particularly charismatic in the War Cultured world. Odin had their loyalty, as he was their king. Thor had their trust. Frigga had their will and adoration. Loki had their curiosity.

It was strange to Darcy, who knew Loki so well, to hear other’s opinions of him. Silly to her was their bafflement at the young Prince’s motives. He was thoroughly against war of any sort, though he practiced magic, which was said to be dangerous and unpredictable. Not all of them thought that way. Progressive Aesir disagreed and had no qualms with Loki’s sorcery. Extremists likely bred in Nornheim claimed that Loki was unfit to be a part of the royal family because of his enchanting lifestyle.

The Capital tended to have more liberal standpoint than Nornheim, so almost none had reason to despise or criticize him.

The problem was that Loki never went to speak with any of them. At times when the royals addressed the public, he was formal and persuasive, speaking eloquently and with enough charm to drown a sorceress. He was never uncomfortable, he just never acted like himself. Darcy advised him to be freer around the people he might one day rule. Being a King was more than just attending meetings and debating opinions before signing a few slips of paper.

It was knowing what the realm needed. It was knowing the people in order to help them.

Thor was just the opposite of Loki. He was the Asgardian vision of a perfect prince. Strong, blonde, and proud, Thor was a public phenomenon. Everyone wanted to drink with him, women crowded him as he entered the later parts of his teen years, and he still didn’t have the slightest idea on how to rule a realm.

Darcy had come to respect war culture. Though she disagreed with the glorification of battle and strength in combat, it was the history and tradition of Asgard. They needed war or at least some form of trouble. They liked it. It was what brought their pride and reason for celebration. It was an ingrained part of the Asgardian identity and Darcy wasn’t going to be the one to challenge the Aesir on their mores.

Even Frigga shared some of these traits. She couldn’t idly be Queen, she had to be doing something battle-related even if that was running a secret spy group under Odin’s nose. Though Frigga did things differently than most Aesir and Darcy suspected that was because she was raised in the tamer parts of Vanaheim.

And Darcy deduced that since it was Frigga who raised Loki, he shared her beliefs.
Back at her house, Darcy had entered her room to find Loki sitting on her bed with Frank and Fenrir lying across his lap while he fiddled with his fingers, making sour faces as he focused his energy. He abandoned his work the minute she stepped in.

After greeting her warmly and helping her with their books, Loki presented her with a few of the most recent notes from his meeting with the inter-realm committee. She told him about her plans for the night and Loki’s pout was cute. It was obvious he didn’t mean to look so put-out, but he did and Darcy promised that they could spend the next afternoon in the gardens, having a day of rest. She needed some time just the two of them without any meetings or people consulting her about this and that.

As fun as it was to be advisor, she still just liked spending time with Loki.

Loki had insisted that since she was spending the night at someone else’s house, she should have her hair in a braid so that it didn’t get tangled the next day. Darcy smiled at this because even though she was starting high school, getting older and all that, Loki still persisted in doing her hair.

She sat between his legs on her bed, her back to him as he started gently pulling her hair back, his long fingers gently running across her forehead. Sighing, Darcy began to relax just as her cell phone rang. She was about to get annoyed that someone was calling her now, but was pleasantly surprised when she saw Peter’s caller ID on the screen.

“Peter!” she answered happily. They talked about once a month, in which time he asked her questions about science and Darcy made sure he was getting along with people at school. He said it was fine, but Darcy wasn’t stupid. Peter was one of those people who just wanted to please, and those were the most commonly bullied people. Peter also spoke a great deal with Loki as the two of them shared a passion for math that Darcy understood but was less enthusiastic about.

“Hey Darce, I wanted to check up. How’s it goin’?” he asked cheerily.

“I’m great, actually,” Darcy answered, talking a bit about starting high school and the two of them caught up for another few minutes before Loki interrupted.

“Darcy?” he whispered, setting down the brush. “I have a question for Peter Parker.”

She suppressed a chuckle, “Hey, Peter, Loki wants to talk. Yeah, here he is.” She handed Loki the phone and he held it between his ear and shoulder.

“Yes, hello Peter Parker…I agree, it has been too long…what is your opinion on genetic mutations? I’ve been reading about them recently. Inhumane, yes. But interesting…..”

Darcy flinched as Loki hit a particular snarly tangle and he paused his conversation to apologize.

He began braiding. Darcy was impressed by Loki’s hair-doing abilities. He did the most complex braids, hardly paying attention to the masterpiece he was creating. He claimed it was because he spent years watching his mother weave. Darcy didn’t even begin to believe him, as it was custom for men on Asgard to be skilled at braiding since their hair was sometimes just as long as women’s.

He started at the hair behind her right ear, taking it to the back of her head then did the same to the other side. He repeated this with several bits of hair behind her ears, then started a more intricate braid at the top of her head and twisted her hair until he could tie in the smaller braids, making a multipart rope that settled between her shoulder blades.

By the time he finished he had silenced his musings on inhumane testing on live subjects and was attentively listening to Peter’s book recommendations. Darcy started on Romeo and Juliet, leaning
back against Loki’s chest while he soothingly ran his fingers up and down her arm. He commented shortly on some theory book or another that he disagreed with.

His voice had deepened a bit. Not a whole lot, but Darcy noticed the subtle change. He’d also gotten taller. She grew two inches that summer and her mom said it was unlikely that she would ever grow past 5’4”. Darcy resented that Loki would forever be taller than her. She knew she had to accept it one day.

Darcy read the prologue and decided that Shakespeare was really dramatic. But as she continued into the first act, she admitted to herself that his sex jokes were on point.

By the end, Darcy made up her mind that she hated everything. Of course she knew the ending to *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragedy of it. But there was a difference between knowing the tragedy and reading the tragedy. When she threw the book and began tearing up, Loki said goodbye to Peter who he’d been talking to for almost three and a half hours now.

“Darcy?” he asked, settling both hands on her shoulders. “Are you alright?”

She sniffled, wiping away her tears. “That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever read. Dumb…cheesy…love…stupid teenagers and their love.”

Loki chuckled wrapping his arms around her and pressing his face into her neck. “I’ve read most of Shakespeare. I found it rather beautiful as well.”

“When did you read Shakespeare?” she asked, finally over her moment of intense emotions and annoyance with all things family related.

She felt him shrug. “A while ago. I began reading fictitious Midgardian texts because of how many references are made to them in the modern world. Your father owns all of his works. Did you know he studied classics before deciding to be a fireman?”

“Duh. He’s my dad. Our car rides involve him quoting old dead people and me pretending to listen,” Darcy said, secretly humored by her father’s antics.

Loki smiled into her hair, Darcy holding one of his hands in one of hers for a long moment.

“Loki?”

“Hm,” he hummed, his breathing slow and Darcy knew he must be tired. Whenever she left him to his own devices on Asgard, he forgot to eat and sleep. She believed he remembered to shower. Loki had a vain streak and he cared more about what his hair looked like than his personal health.

Darcy nudged him. “I have to go. You should sleep. And eat actual food. Whatever you say about being Aesir and not needing to eat as often, I call shenanigans. You’re a dirty liar.”

He groaned, tightening his hold on her and collapsed to the side, pulling her with him. She gasped for air. “Loki…” she managed. “…mortal…Asgardian strength…incompatible…”

Lessening his hold, he let his arms go limp so she could crawl from his embrace. “Darcy, I cannot sleep. There are monsters under my bed.”

She snorted, throwing her stuff into an overnight bag. “Well there are gods under mine, so I think I win.”

He muttered something in Allspeak, shoving his head under a pillow while Fenrir made himself comfortable sitting on his back.
She threw a pair of folded socks at his shoulder, which he didn’t bother to catch. “Come on, Loki. It’s only four o’clock. Go sleep on your royal prince bed and I’ll be there tomorrow.”

Nothing.

She rolled her eyes, scooting Fenrir away so she could sit across Loki’s back, a knee on each side of his body. Lifting up his shirt, she began scratching his back in order to get his blood moving. It was a trick she’d learned to wake him up in the mornings when they had things to do on Asgard.

“Darcy,” he protested into the sheets. “Leave me.”

Beaming in triumph, she scratched light circles over his ribs, causing him to flinch. Irritably, he threw the pillow that had covered his head and turned his head to scowl at her through narrowed eyes. “Sleep through the night. If you sleep now, you’ll be awake so early in the morning that you’ll be testy the rest of the day.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “I shall return to Asgard when you depart.”

She ran her fingers through his hair, smoothing it back. When he sat up, she held out her pinky to him. “Pinky promise?”

He narrowed his eyes before relenting and linking their fingers, “Pinky promise.”

“Good,” she said cheerily. “Tell Sigyn I said ‘hello’ and, if you feel up to it, punch Sif in the boob and say it’s from Darcy.”

“I knew it,” he said, closing his eyes again. “You wish me dead.”

“Absolutely,” Darcy agreed happily, moving off of him to get going. As she stood up, Loki grasped her wrist. “Lokes…”

But he didn’t make an effort to pull her back. He just held her hand for a moment, giving her a curious kind of look. “Have fun, pass my greetings to Grace.”

“Will do,” she said when he let go and she hurriedly picked up her bag and checked her clock. “I’m going to be late.” Rushing to the door, she shot one last glance at Loki. “I love you. Eat. Sleep. Fun. Sif’s boob.”

***

Loki stayed true to his promise and returned to Asgard, ate a full meal without falling asleep and was sitting in the library playing with a new spell.

He did not, however, punch Sif’s ‘boob’ and he was not having fun.

That week, Loki had been feeling especially needy. He was so tired, all he really wanted to do was sit in Darcy’s room and sleep. Her bed smelt better than his bed. His sheets were changed every day and it didn’t feel like his bed anymore.

So, instead of attempting sleep, he would stay up reading, or staring at the sky, or completing his princely responsibilities. He loved Asgard, though had recently come to hate it to some extent. Asgard was boring and the people held no appreciation for magic and mischief.

He sat back, pulling out his newest journal and writing down a few notes about his spell just as a messenger approached his corner, giving a slight bow. “Your Highness.”
“Speak,” Loki accepted the message passively. Most likely he was needed in some meeting or another.

The messenger held his hands behind his back. “The Allfather demands your presence in his study.”

Loki raised a singular black brow at the messenger, snapping his journal shut. “Demands?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the messenger assured, swallowing thickly and Loki wondered why he seemed uneasy. If he had lied, Loki would have been the first to know.

Loki sat back, pursing his lips while the messenger was itching to be allowed to go. “Tell him I am preoccupied.”

The messenger turned whiter than a sheet. “Your Highness, he was rather adamant about your attendance.”

Loki considered him for a moment, choosing to reply dismissively. “Very well. Continue your duties, Herdar.”

The messenger turned away then looked curiously back to Loki. “You know my name? Your Highness,” he added quickly.

Loki fought the urge to roll his eyes. “Yes, I have lived in this palace long enough to learn names.”

Herdar bowed once more, considerably less apprehensive. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

His thanks puzzled Loki, though he put aside his confusion, having more pressing matters to tend to. The Allfather was in a sour mood. Lately, Loki widely associated his father’s bitterness with himself. He was unsure why, but Odin was being particularly harsh towards him.

They weren’t monumental acts of offense, but rather neglect. It seemed to Loki that Odin was ignoring his second son’s existence. In council meetings, Odin would interrupt right before he was able to speak what little he did at their conferences. The first time this occurred, Loki brushed it off as an accident. But it kept happening. Odin disrupted every effort he made to voice his arguments and opinions.

Odin no longer spoke with him. He called Thor in for visits that would have once belonged to Loki. He didn’t want to think that his father respected Thor more than him, but he knew it was true. All their lives, Odin had made it quite clear who his favorite was. It was just getting more noticeable as of late.

The Allfather would compliment Thor on his efforts in the training field or a technique he used in one of his tales of battle. Loki received none of this and while he did have the court’s appreciation as a prince, Thor alone had the approval of Odin as a son.

Loki very dearly wanted that.

He could admit this to himself on his own in the comforts of his library. He had not yet gathered the courage to tell Darcy of Odin’s coldness towards him. He feared that he was being petty.

He was getting older, was he not? He should not require Odin fretting over him like a mother hen.

Independent as he was this summer, it was no wonder Odin was not showing him any kindness. He was soon to be a man. Men did not need affirmation from their fathers to succeed at their perusals.
Hence, Loki willed Odin’s inert tendencies not to bother him.

But somehow they still managed to strike a discord.

Because Odin did not extend his detached attitudes to Thor. It was just the opposite.

Every bit of compassion Odin ever seemed to have for Loki had been moved to Thor, his thick-skulled brother who had stopped attending any meetings and was hardly at the palace anymore. Loki knew Thor left to go have his ridiculous adventures through the city. So far, he’d deduced that all he did was drink and make offensive attempts at flirting with common women. Not that Loki had any problems with common women, but with Odin’s recent distaste for Loki, it looked as though Thor might soon become the crown prince.

And dressing up like a peasant and prancing around with Fandral and Hogun every night was disrespectful to his title.

Darcy did the same thing, except she went to discover more about Asgard and she always took notes. She found her trips interesting and always asked Loki if he wanted to go with her. Loki had yet to say yes. The idea of going out was a nice concept, but he did not want to be like Thor. If all there was to do outside the palace was drink and stare after women, he would rather stay in the library.

Stowing his journal, he let Jörmungandr slither around his body and chose to teleport to outside Odin’s study door, enjoying the shocked expressions of the guards at his sudden appearance. Thor was just strutting forwards, a broad smile on his face as he greeted Loki. “Brother! You look terrible.”

Loki sighed, looking to the ceiling with a pained expression. “It runs in the family.”

Thor clapped him on the shoulder. “Indeed. Why is it that father has summoned us?”

“You guess is as good as mine.” He paused for a moment, cocking his head to the side and smirking. “Or perhaps not.”

“You wound me,” Thor said mockingly, addressing the guards. “Well, does he wish to see us or not?”

The guards nodded and opened the thick golden doors to allow their princes to enter. Odin sat at his desk, hands folded, eyeing them menacingly. Loki might have imagined that glare was intended for him more so than Thor.

Loki bowed, as was customary when summoned by the king whether he was your father or not.

Thor did not bow. In fact, Thor did not show any sign of respect, instead choosing to stare expectantly at the Allfather. “Father, why have you summoned us?”

Odin’s eye flicked between his sons and he stood. Loki, who had always seen Odin as a domineering figure, deemed that he appeared smaller now. Perhaps it was because Loki had grown.

“Loki.” Odin said his name as if it hurt. “Answer Thor’s question.”

Loki’s brows came up and he suddenly felt less tired. Even a challenge initiated by anger was a challenge nonetheless. He quelled his desires to be mordant. It could very well be his unintentional hostility that had put Odin off him.
It took him little effort to derive what the Allfather wanted from them. He would never call them in such anger lest they had done something wrong. If it had been just Thor, then his wrath would have been something about the eldest prince’s nightly adventures. If only Loki, then the Allfather’s resentment would have been founded on Loki’s constant trips to other realms without his consent.

Since they were together, it would be that they were not completing their princely duties.

Frank flicked his tongue at Thor, a gesture that Loki had discerned to be rude. Jörmungandr made it at his food before eating. Thor hardened his gaze at the serpent and Loki smoothed his hand over Jörmungandr’s head to soothe him.

“We are not performing our obligations to Asgard to your standards.”

“Wrong,” Odin said immediately, causing Loki’s heart to drop into his stomach.

Thor looked to Loki in shock, probably because Loki was never wrong. Ever. Loki prided himself in being right. And suddenly, he is wrong because the Allfather says so. He dearly wished he had chosen to disobey Darcy’s command and sleep in her bed. If he had been there, he would not have to suffer the humiliation of being ‘wrong’.

“You are not performing your obligations to the realm to Asgard’s standards,” the Allfather corrected, anger seeming to subside. Loki watched, intrigued. His fury seemed baseless. He had no reason to be upset with Loki, did he? What had he done? There were a great many things Loki did to potentially get on his father’s irritable side, yet he could think of none that Odin knew of.

The King paced the room, striding to the space before his desk. “Thor.”

“Father.”

“You have taken pains to be discreet, but I am aware of your nightly whereabouts, nonetheless.” Odin narrowed his eye. “I know you have been taking excursions into the city with Lady Darcy.”

‘Lady’ Darcy…

Darcy and Thor…

…together…

What.

Loki had never been so angry in his life. Thor did not go on trips with Darcy. None that Darcy had told him of. Perhaps Darcy was lying to him. He quickly pushed the idea from his head. Darcy would surely tell him if she was interested in Thor.

But she could not be.

Oh gods, have the Valkyries take him now if Darcy went with Thor on his absurd outings.

And why was Odin crediting Thor for the action of Darcy? Loki’s advisor? Thor was only drinking and disturbing the peace. Darcy went with purpose. Surely Odin must see that.

The worst part of the Allfather’s avowal had been the words ‘Lady Darcy’. Loki was boiling. He struggled not to let his contempt show, though he could not help himself from uttering a correction to Odin’s statement.

“Advisor Darcy.”
Odin either didn’t hear him, or pretended not to, for he continued praising Thor. “You have contributed a great deal and I applaud you for your efforts in better getting to know your people. Lady Darcy’s reports have shown that the public considers you charismatic—"

“Advisor Darcy,” Loki said, louder this time.

Odin kept on, “—And many claim that they feel safer in knowing such a strong prince is there for them in the future. Lady Darcy—"

Loki had enough. It was one thing to disrespect him, as Odin was his father and he had the right. But Darcy was not Odin’s to bully. Darcy was precious and the best thing that had happened to Asgard...the best thing to happen to him...and Loki would destroy worlds before anyone got to her.

“Did you hear me, Allfather? Or are you so old that my voice has grown dull to you? She is Advisor Darcy, it is her title,” Loki snapped, his tone giving way to his rage.

Odin turned to him, only slightly, mild disapproval shadowing his face. Loki’s perplexity was greater than his oncoming anguish. How had this happened? How was it that Thor, the ever foolish, the ever reckless, was extolled for something that Loki’s Darcy had done?

And Darcy was his. She would never, not under any circumstances, be Thor’s.

“Your brother has been productive in his time. I have seen it fit to congratulate him and you interrupt to insult your father?” Odin asked in that blank, obvious way of his.

Loki was becoming ever more enraged and he did not dare look to Thor; he kept his gaze sternly locked on Odin. “I would reaffirm your congratulations towards him if I had any reason to believe that your assumptions of his discoveries with Advisor Darcy are true.”

Odin paced towards the window, directing his attention away from Loki, as if his presence bored him. “And you have no reason to believe anything I say is true? Have you yet to venture with her yourself and see the people who you rule over?”

“Have I?” Loki scoffed. “Have you?”

Thor inhaled sharply. “Loki, enough,” he whispered urgently.

He seethed spite; his tongue was newly sharpened and eager to cut throats. “The actions of Thor and I are incomparable and I disagree with your proceedings to do so.”

“You disagree?” inquired Odin lightly, as if he were dismissing a servant. “You? Have you not been disagreeing with every statement made by the court? Obstinate to every idea that passes you by, I am not surprised.”

Loki clenched his fists and Jörmungandr was nervously circling the floor as an ouroboros. “I have the right.”

“Just as I have the right to commend one son on his actions—“

“--And demand my presence here to do so? As an audience perhaps? You could have asked politely.” Loki stepped closer, wanting Odin to look at him. To see how his betrayal affected him. Did he not care? Was it his intention to slight him?

The Allfather held his hands behind his back. “I called you here for a reason as well.”
“Pray tell, My King, lest I bore you to tears before the night has come,” Loki lashed out, hoping for some reaction. Anything.

Odin’s hands clenched behind his back and Loki’s heart twisted in painful success. Of course Odin would be upset with him. He would not even see his pain. He would not see his fury at his belittlement of Darcy.

“Loki, you will accompany Thor tonight. Learn about your realm. You do enjoy that sort of thing, or is it only magic that interests you now rather than the good of your people?” Odin asked, a bite in his tone.

Loki was prepared to burn his tongue with the heat of his retort. Never had he felt more insulted and never before had he felt more need to defend himself. Did Odin truly suggest that he was to learn from Thor about the nature of his own realm?

Thor spoke before him, worry etched into his face. “Yes Father, I will take him. Loki, come—“

“Is magic nothing to you then? Magic which holds this realm together? Magic which you wield yourself and you talk of it as if it is nothing? Is my practice what has offended you so? That I am not a warrior?” Loki shot, each question like a Midgardian bullet, weak and meaningless, fired with malicious intent. Odin coolly rejected them with his steady gaze over the Asgardian horizon.

“You refuse to enter the city yet travel to far off places without consent or regard for safety,” Odin answered just casually. “What have I to say to that but to acknowledge your resistance to learn?”

“And so my studies mean nothing to you,” Loki stated, standing solidly, resisting his brother’s attempts to urge him from the room.

Odin remained ever emotionless, his face blank. Loki knew there were words to be said. There was a lie in Odin’s being and Loki could sense it. “What are you not saying, Allfather?” he growled, spitting acid through his teeth. Venom seeped from his core as the product of his bewilderment. Jörmungandr looked scared. Loki would console him later.

When Odin continued to be silent, Loki broke what little composition he had and clenched his fists, shouting a command at the Allfather. “Tell me!”

Thor was shoving him at this point, very nearly carrying his brother out of the study. Loki could hardly fight back, for sentiment had frozen him to the spot, his voice carrying his aggression.

“Are we not equals?!” Loki demanded, voicing the thoughts that had been bouncing around in his mind for the past year.

Odin still said nothing.

A moment of quiet passed.

Loki waited.

Thor waited.

When no denial fell from the ancient lips of the Allfather, Loki digressed.

He stood tall, halting Thor’s attempts to drag him from the study. “Is that it then? Two princes, each doing what they can for their realm and they are not equal.”
At this, Odin Allfather finally turned around, his one blue eye finally settling on Loki. “A question such as that is borne from a vacuous mind. You are dismissed.”

Loki could have screamed. He could have done a great many things. But at those words, straight from the mouth of his own father, he felt his stomach bottom out. It was true then, that Odin did not see him as Thor’s equal. It was the truth. A bitter truth. It was not a lie, Loki of all people would know.

He composed himself in a second, relaxing and righting his posture. Thor relaxed his hold and Loki pushed back his hair, straightening his armor from where Thor had pulled on it.

Odin was looking at him now and Loki decided he would not want Odin to see his torment, as it was evident now that he did not care. Not breaking eye-contact, he bowed in acceptance of his dismissal. “I thank you for your time, Allfather.”

With that, he left the room, scooping up Jörmungandr on his way out. Once in the halls, he began talking to his shocked snake. “No no, Jörmungandr. Do not be upset. I was not angry with you. You have done nothing wrong. I promise I will not yell when you are around.”

Jörmungandr still looked quite shaken and he was heavy in Loki’s arms as he was not supporting himself in any way. Nevertheless, he lifted his scaly head to lick Loki on the nose as a form of comfort.

Thor gave him a baffled look. “You have such care for your pets.”

Loki did not respond. How was he supposed to answer the brother that was superior to himself? Thor was not denying Odin’s statement.

He looked to the blonde prince hesitantly, Jörmungandr cradled in his arms. “All living things need care. All people do.” Jörmungandr licked his nose again, showing that Loki was forgiven for his scariness.

Thor nodded, clapping a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Come out with me tonight Loki. Not for father. For yourself. It will be fun, I promise. Father…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “I do not know why he would say such things lest he was attempting to teach us a lesson.”

“Perhaps,” Loki answered, unsure. He wanted so badly to believe that it was a hoax and Odin had given him a test of some sort. But there was no way to know.

They walked down the hall, walking past pillars and statues of great Asgardian leaders, reflecting the evening sun. Thor initiated conversation again uncertainly. “Loki…Darcy and I…we have not spent time together outside of the palace. I have seen her out on occasion, and we speak. But she does not accompany us. Only when Sif is there does she even stop to have a drink.”

This settled something inside Loki and he was overcome with contentment at knowing she was his. Mine. He thought and the idea washed him in tranquility. It was almost unsettling how soothing the thought was. What had come over him?

Whatever it was, it reassured him. Equating to Thor in the Allfather’s eyes was meaningless so long as he had Darcy and his mother. He could never imagine Frigga agreeing to anything Odin said. He was sure he had her approval.

“Come out with us, Loki,” Thor repeated, stopping them and tugging on Loki’s shoulder so he was forced to look in his brother’s eye. “I am…concerned for you.”
Thor’s worry was like washing out a wound; painful at first, though preferable to a festering malady later on.

Sighing, he pushed his hair back. “I shall accompany you. Though I must warn you, I do not drink.”

Thor laughed merrily, ruffling his hair. “Is it because of Nornheim?”

“Thor—”

“It is! You are not scared of breasts?” Thor mocked good-naturedly and Loki donned an aggrieved expression.

“Let us go, before I change my mind.”

***

Sif felt naked without her armor.

It was a strange feeling, to wear so much weight all the time and have her body become accustomed to it. The supportive nature of her armor forced her to sit up straight and walk with a firm stride. Without her protective wear, she felt as plain and flimsy as overcooked cabbage.

Her armor was a gift from Thor, a gift she would always be thankful for. He asked Baldur to craft her first set a few years after they became friends. Military issued armor was made for men and she was injured quite often wearing it. Thor took notice of her skill and how the armor was ill suited, taking it upon himself to have her fit.

And like Thor, her armor attracted attention, which was the opposite of what she had in mind for this evening.

As of late Thor, Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg had taken to sneaking out at night to go gallivant through the city dressed as common-folk. Sif participated and was awed by all there was to see.

She wanted Sigyn to see it with her.

Of course, sneaking out would be of greater consequence to Sigyn than it would any of the others. Darcy went out, but she was different. She had set a precedent for herself that she took orders from no one but herself and the Queen and sometimes Odin.

Even as Loki’s advisor, she had more control over him than he over her. Loki would conquer Yggdrasil if she gave him the word.

That, of course, was why Sif couldn’t find it in her heart to be resentful of Loki any longer. He was enamored by Darcy, though there were few who weren’t. Darcy was her friend and she would support her friends and those who treated her friends well. Loki treated both of her best lady friends with the utmost respect.

However, Sif nearly put a sword through him a few days ago.

She had gone in search of Sigyn, much like she was now, in the early evening. Late enough to be in bed, but early enough to have a few stolen minutes.

Sif was, by military law, required to sleep in the barracks, but Sigyn had convinced her to stay most nights in her plush rooms. Sif’s insides bubbled at the thought. She felt so full of air that she might
just float away. Sigyn was a still sleeper. She hardly moved, but to huddle closer to Sif. Sleep was like Valhalla with Sigyn.

She smelled like rose gardens and lemon grass and her laugh was rare and characteristically charming. There were so many reasons for Sif to like Sigyn.

Her kindness, her individuality amongst the crowd of dolls of the court, her dry wit....

Sigyn was funny and the rest of the world always missed it. There were things to pay attention to, small subtle things she did that gave way to her humor.

Just the other day, Thor had been going on about some barmaid whose hair reminded him of a rose. Sigyn had taken a sip of her water, and said very quietly, “I worry for him when he truly is faced with a rose. He will cut his tongue on a thorn in his cluelessness.”

Sif had laughed so hard that she couldn’t even begin to eat again, for every time she looked at her dining partners, she would break into hysterics. It was fascinating to Sif how Sigyn liberated herself, in her own way, from the tight restraints of the ladies’ expectations.

She made quiet jests, courted a prince of her choice, took archery lessons along with the Einherjar, and made room in her bed for an orphaned lower-rank warrior. And she didn’t give a damn about what the rest of the other ladies thought.

Sigyn told her that she had spent her life caring about their concerns for her. Now, she sought to focus on her friendships and do only what her parents required of her.

That idea made Sif bitter.

Because Sigyn’s parents wished for her to court princes and become a part of the royal family. And with every passing day, Sif despised that notion more and more. Loki was good to her, no doubt. But he had feelings for Darcy, did he not? Sif was sure he did. She and Sigyn questioned Darcy about it a few times and she only made faces and denied their accusations.

Sif still thought she was lying.

Therefore, she had disregarded the depths of Loki’s intentions. Sigyn would likely refuse courtships with a great many men after Loki and Darcy pulled their heads from their books and realized how well they went together. And if Loki was with Darcy, he wouldn’t be with Sigyn, which was the part Sif cared about.

Of course, this is what she had previously thought until a few nights ago.

It had been a night much like this one and she was wandering the corridors in search of her friend. Sigyn had not been in her room at the time, so Sif presumed that she might have taken to the library for some reading or a visit with Loki if he had not stepped out for the night.

The library was empty and the only light came from Loki’s corner. It glowed like a beacon from within the darkness of the library and Sif approached it as quietly as possible, for she heard no voices. She would hate to disturb Sigyn’s reading.

But as soon as she turned the corner the air was sucked from her body quicker than if she’d been hit by Mjolnir.

Sigyn and Loki had been... It was almost too miserable to think of, but they had been kissing. Sigyn and Loki.
Oh, she had wished Loki had been doing something out of place. She wished he had been irresponsible and out of line, that way she would have reason to bash him into the precious books he loved so much. But he hadn’t been out of line.

One of his hands cradled Sigyn’s cheek and the other held her hand. They’d pulled apart almost immediately and Sigyn had looked to her in what Sif identified as horror.

Sif on the other hand, had managed to compose herself, feeling numb on the inside. Why was Sigyn kissing Loki? Did she want to kiss him? Or was she just doing what her family asked of her?

Sif had excused herself and formally apologized, heading in the direction of the barracks. For the first time in a very long time, she did not wish to share a bed with Sigyn. And Sif deeply wished the revelation that was upon her would not be true.

She was enough of a misfit as she was. A woman warrior. A black haired child, disowned from her noble family.

She wanted to believe that she was only feeling betrayed because Loki might take priority of Sigyn’s attention over her. But she knew that wasn’t true. Darcy was Loki’s first and foremost. Just as Sigyn was Sif’s.

That night, Sif had buried her face in a pillow and willed herself not to cry.

She knew already that she was not attracted to men as described by ladies her age. She did not find them particularly beautiful. She saw sides of men, living with them for so long, that she never wished to see again. They were rough with each other and rough with her. They made good friends and trusty comrades, though she did not swoon over their smiles or muscles and she never wished to have their hands upon her in any manner but a fight or friendship.

Unable to sleep, she had stalked to the ladies’ washrooms inside the palace to wash her face and lean over a basin full of hot water. Steam fogged the mirror, and she wiped the glass surface to better see her reflection.

She had the face of a noblewoman and the body of a fighter.

She had a heart doomed to loneliness. Even if she was accepted into her family again once she made her way to the highest rank of warrior possible, which was the condition to her familial exile, they would be rid of her again if she denied them children.

The thought of sharing a bed with a man made her sick.

She’d buried her face in her hands, which smelled of rose soap. Her hands smelled of Sigyn. The tears started then because Sif could not deny herself the truth any longer. The little lady had taken her heart. Perhaps all of those who teased her about being a man were right.

Joining the military. Falling in love with a woman. She was a disgrace.

After that night, Sif had tried her best to avoid Sigyn. She asked one of her acquaintances to take up teaching Sigyn archery, and no sooner had he accepted than Sigyn decided to quit her lessons.

She’d sought out Sif, finding her in a distant corner of the library, hiding and brooding.

Her bright blue eyes had been full of tears and her cheeks were flushed with anger. She apologized and admitted that she felt uncomfortable talking about her relationship with Loki to anyone. It pained Sif to accept these answers when the truth burned on her tongue.
She was not upset because she had not told her about Loki; she was upset because she was kissing Loki and not her.

Eventually, she had gotten a hold of herself, promising to keep her feelings secret. Sigyn’s friendship was far too valuable to waste on a confession of feelings that could never be reciprocated.

She resolved to ignore her disclosure, pressing down her desires in favor of spending time with Sigyn.

It felt wrong. Unsettling, as her secret was, sometimes she felt as though Sigyn might return her sentiment. Those early times in the morning, before the sky was truly lit, Sif would wake up with Sigyn hugging her from behind. It made her feel small, but in a comfortable way. It wasn’t demeaning or crude; it was comfortable and made Sif’s heartache because this lady had not the slightest idea of how she had robbed the warrior of her sanity.

They would look at each other at those times, sharing a tired smile before snuggling closer together until it was time for Sif to leave, just before Sigyn’s handmaidens entered.

That was how Sif lived her summer until Thor began sneaking out and requesting that she accompany him. The tediousness of palace life was enough to destroy the spirit of any adventurous warrior and Sif was happy to be away while she could.

Their trips at night were fascinating. Street vendors sold foods that would never be served in the palace, the dancing was freer, the music livelier, the dresses simpler, the mead sweeter, and the people friendlier. No one looked twice at Sif’s choice of pants over a skirt. She tasted equality and a sense of community that did not exist in the battle of politics in the upper class.

Thor fit right in, swathing himself in merriment. Fandrall swooned over women, offering up his most charming smiles and niceties which somehow managed to tempt girls to sit in his lap while recalling adventures of their own to him.

Sif spent some time with Darcy, though usually Darcy was working when she went into the city, writing reports and taking notes, questioning people. It was funny to Sif how completely clueless Darcy was as to how much people adored her.

It was apparent in the faces of those she spoke to that they recognised her, peasant attire or no. Her face was a memorable one and her personality as well.

As Loki’s advisor, Darcy spent a lot more time formally addressing the public. Therefore, they were more familiar with her face than Thor’s or Loki’s. The princes could get away with disguising themselves and Darcy could as well if one did not look to closely. But the capital city was besotted with her. Asgard had somehow made the girl into an idol, despite her youth. Her personage compensated for her age.

Sif had sat in a great many of taverns while the barmaids spoke of Prince Loki’s advisor, chatting about how they hoped she might end up princess one day.

It was because Darcy paid attention to them. Unlike the rest of the lords and ladies who locked themselves away inside their own private tense worlds, Darcy asked them if they were happy. She stood at podiums during summer festivals and seasonal banquets, speaking as if the entire Asgardian population were her friend and she theirs.

She wanted to know how they felt. Who they appreciated, who they didn’t, if they liked the royal
family, if they were being treated fairly. If Sif could say anything about her friend, it was that she a
brilliant advisor.

There was one establishment that Sif entered with Thor and she’d convinced Darcy to come for a
drink. She sat at the bar while Darcy scribbled in her journal. People danced, twirling and laughing
while fiddles strummed so fast their players’ fingers must have been raw.

Amongst the crowd of dancers, she saw two women dancing together and Sif believed they were
friends as Darcy, who she figured had been a part of the lower class at some point, often danced
with her and Sigyn.

But the longer the women danced, the more Sif began to notice how they looked at each other.
Their eyes shone with unrestrained happiness and Sif sighed a breath of relief when she saw them
kiss. She rubbed her eyes, fearing she had been imagining things. Sure enough, the women kissed
again, smiling at the other while people cheered.

Darcy explained to her that the two women were engaged.

Sif wanted Sigyn to see that.

Why?

Because she had sick, sick hope that Sigyn might be in her same position and witnessing two
people together like that might show her what could be.

Sif now flitted through the halls, coming across Sigyn’s door and cracking it open. The light from
the hearth was still brightly lit and Sigyn sat in bed, reading. She looked up at Sif’s appearance and
beamed. “Sif, come.” She waved her forward, patting the spot beside her. “I want to show you
something.”

Unable to resist her friend’s enthusiasm, Sif made herself comfortable next to Sigyn, looking at her
book. There was a very large image on one page, sketched by hand, of armor. Very nice armor by
the looks of it, and made for a woman.

She smiled at the page. “It is beautiful.”

And it was. The majority of it was leather, shaded brown, crossing in a layered pattern from around
the hips up. The breastplate was gold and the shoulders were strange. Not smooth as Sif’s armor
was. A feathered pattern was carved into it, the extra plating on the back made to look like wings.
The helm was smooth on the top, the wings on the side angling down rather than up; they looked
sleek, unlike Thor’s helm.

“It is crafted to look like a Valkyrie,” Sigyn said, “I thought of you when I saw it.”

Sif tried not to take that statement too personally, lest she crave an overactive heart. “Me? A
Valkyrie? Perhaps I should send for Eir, you must be ill.”

Sigyn nudged her. “It seemed a fair design and made for a woman. I thought perhaps I might hire
Baldur to craft it.”

Sif shook her head vigorously. It was one thing for Thor to gift her armor. He was, and has always
been, her friend. Just her friend. The thought of being more had passed through her head and it
made her uncomfortable to imagine it. If Sigyn were to gift her armor, Sif would not be able to hold
her secret in any longer.
“No. I do not think it is for me,” Sif smiled, pointing to the sketch of the back. “This style of armor is meant for warriors on long ships or especially fast horses, perhaps even sea serpents. Of course those are only legends, aren’t they?” She tugged at the ends of her hair, thinking back to stories of women so powerful that they could mount the beasts of the sea and ride them along the surface.

Sigyn seemed only mildly disappointed. “Ah, well. Perhaps for Darcy. She would certainly find it amusing.”

“Quite,” Sif agreed, silent for a moment as she sorted out how to ask her question. “Sigyn?”

Sif cleared her throat. “Would you…tonight….Well…Thor has been leaving the palace at night lately. And I know that usually you--or we--don’t do a whole lot and…well…the city is a very nice place and I thought…” Sif took a breath willing her tongue not to fail her now. “…you might like to come?”

Sigyn’s face fell and she looked down at her book, pressing her lips together in a way that meant she was weighing her options. “I do not know.”

Sif decided that she was going to figure out a way to remove her heart from her body so that it would stop hurting her so much. She could taste the rejection on the Sigyn’s lips. Well, she couldn’t really taste it. But she wished she could taste it…them…

She closed her eyes willing the gods to hate her just a little less. “Sif, I would love to, but…”

Sif waited for the worst, completely still.

“…if I am caught, it is possible I could lose my title and my virtue,” Sigyn said quietly. “I want to…I really, really want to, Sif. But I cannot take risks like you or Thor. He is a prince. It is almost expected that he take liberties like the delights of the night.”

Sif wished she didn’t understand, but she did.

“That is alright, Sigyn,” Sif assured, kicking off her boots. “We’ll figure out something. You can read to me from that wrist breaking tome you hold.”

Sigyn cocked a brow. “I have held more dangerous things than this.”

“Like what?” Sif asked moving her feet under the covers.

“More like ‘whom’,” Sigyn smiled, setting down the book on the other side of Sif.

The dark haired girl frowned, hiding her displeasure in her pillow. “I suppose Loki is quite dangerous at times.”

Sigyn snorted and Sif felt warm on the inside. She loved it when Sigyn snorted. It was endearing.

“Sif, in the wise words of Darcy ‘you are so stupid’. Loki is not dangerous. He is…” Sigyn tilted her head back and forth, searching for the right word. “…intense. And besides,” she said flipping the covers over herself as well, pulling Sif to her. “I have never held Loki.”

Sif was going to go find a healer and beg them to remove her innards. It was when Sigyn said ridiculous things like this that Sif feared she was falling ill. Her everything ached and Sigyn continued to torment her by picking up a book from her side table and beginning to read aloud Asgardian classics, written in language far older than they spoke now. It was beautiful how
effortlessly Sigyn produced the words and her awareness of the historical context, explaining the themes of each piece.

Sif fell asleep to the sound of her voice, because Sigyn was safe and warm and had Sif wrapped entirely around her finger.

***

Loki was thoroughly unimpressed by the tavern Thor had dragged them into.

Or perhaps it was just that he could not calm down. The sheer number of people, dancing, drinking and laughing was overwhelming. Loki was beginning to think Darcy had been right in telling him that he would turn into a ‘hermit’ if he continued with his solitary ways.

Thor had convinced him not to wear green and so he sat at the bar in a plain black shirt, tucked into leather pants. He hated it. He much preferred his armor or an outfit of his choosing. He looked awful.

Finally, after sitting in discomfort for so long, watching Thor and Fandrall recall drunken mistakes they’d made that summer, Loki bought himself a drink. There were no members of the court to humiliate himself around, so he might as well be bored and drunk than bored and sober.

He turned to the barmaid, a woman with light brown hair and beady eyes. “I need to lose my wits, and quickly,” he told her, sorting through his money. The transaction was odd to him as he rarely bought anything. He had no need to.

She smiled friendlily. “You are too young to be so troubled.”

At this Loki laughed, for the last time someone handed him a drink before he inevitably intoxicated himself, they had said the exact same thing. He told the woman so.

She looked less run down and a great deal more youthful when she smiled and Loki struck up conversation and learned that her name was Helga and she was from Skornheim. She had opened this tavern a century ago this fall.

A few drinks later, Loki was having a much better time and a small crowd of very kind women had gathered around him as he told them stories of his and Darcy’s adventures. He told them of Nornheim, leaving out the details that revealed his identity as a prince. They listened attentively as the events rolled off his tongue. He described the battle, not as a quick paced, stabbing, bloody event, but rather how he saw it in his own mind. As a struggle of keeping Darcy alive and crushing a revolt before it started.

It wasn’t until Loki ended the story at Darcy’s recovery that he realized the tavern had stopped with its rambunctious noise and dancing to listen to him speak. One of the girls, who had previously taken shelter in Thor’s lap, now knelt on the ground beside him. “You did kiss her, did you not?”

A blush crept up Loki’s neck, though it was possibly just the drink. The rest of the tavern chimed in, wanting to know if he had kissed Darcy. Fandral and Thor, though previously bitter, began to chortle.

Loki shook his head. “No! I did not kiss her! I court another.”

There was a groan of protest and Loki frowned. “What?”
A man on the barstool to his right clapped him on the shoulder. “But you killed for this lady. She is strong. She fought a rebellion against the blasted Norns and if you truly faced these men to ensure her safety…”

Loki looked to the man quite seriously and he felt whatever he was drinking take over his tongue. “Her safety means the world to me. I love her very much.”

One of the ladies before him clutched her hands over her heart. “Oh, but if you love her, you must kiss her! Or simply tell her so!”

Loki blinked, mystified. “She knows I love her because I do tell her so,” he said to the girl. “But have I not said that I am courting another?”

It went on like that and Loki was far from comprehending what they were trying to convince him to do. He did love Darcy. So? She always told him that she loved him when she left to go someplace, or before they went to sleep. These people did not understand.

Eventually, the topic of magic came up and one of the musicians from the band who had begun to strike up a tune to accompany Loki’s speech asked him, “You practice magic? As a man?”

Loki scoffed. “No. I practice it as a woman,” he replied, bending the will and shape of his body to be that of a female version of himself. People applauded and many gaped at her. Loki figured it was because she was quite attractive. At least, she thought she was quite striking. With a bow of her head, Loki turned male once more.

It was so bizarre to him, for this crowd of people to find him interesting. But he had their attention. He would have been uncomfortable if not for the aid of alcohol. But he felt warm inside and he told the girl sitting on the bar that he wished Darcy was there. She would have fun dancing.

Somewhere along the way, the band started up again and people began to dance. Loki claimed he was far too gone for dancing. A few people remained near him, swapping stories about magic and things. He was engrossed in where they learned and asked if they too had learned from their mothers.

Each shook their heads telling him that their practiced at the Collegium of Magical Theory.

Loki sat and wondered why he did not know about that? He was a prince. He should know these things.

And yet, he didn’t.

Perhaps Odin was right, He did have much to learn. Perhaps his ignorance was what made him less than Thor. It was with this notion in mind when he made the decision to leave the tavern and set out towards the Collegium that the women had spoken of before.

As he walked, he began to sober some and he scolded himself for drinking. Had he not learned his lesson?

Apparently not, for he continued to make poor choices. He searched around him for Jörmungandr who had slithered away as they snuck into the city. Perhaps he was having fun somewhere.

Loki sighed, suddenly very tired and he sat down on a set of stairs leading up to a building crafted of gold and silver, a few of the rooms above suspended by self-generating magic. It was a very nice edifice and Loki unexpectedly found it painful to look at.
He spoke to the Asgardian sky, letting free his questions that may never be answered. “What have I done wrong?” he pleaded with the stars of galaxies far away. “Am I cursed? Plagued? Unseemly?”

Stars were such loud things, their silence screamed at him, as they did not know the answers.

He muttered under his breath, the words of Darcy. “You are all dirty liars.”

And suddenly, he did not wish to explore the collegium for it was late and he was far too tired. He wanted Darcy. He wanted to see her because she was his friend and he cared for her. Perhaps she wanted to see him as well.

He leaned back against a pillar, wishing that the stars would take him to Darcy. Walking he deemed impossible, for his legs felt full of lead. As his vision blurred in the call of sleep, Loki felt the darkness lift him and he settled into a familiar saddle. The wind whipped through his hair as the whisper of bones clicking together echoed across the silent night.

**And so, in the comfort of Hel, he finally lay to rest.**

Chapter End Notes

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Hello all you beautiful humans!

So, a bit about this chapter. It was a bit calmer than last chapter, but there were important things that needed to happen.

First off, Darcy.
She's a smart girl, no doubt about it. But I really wanted to show how intuitive she is about people and how attentive she is to Loki. I'm building up their relationship.
I got a few comments last chapter that asked about why I didn't present a lot of Darcy's life outside of Loki and Asgard. Please trust me on this guys. I know it's kinda rough, but due to the busy nature of being a student, I have to cut out some of it. Darcy's home life will never be the focus of the story. I plan out each chapter ahead of time, and there will be snippits of her life implemented for plot-related purposes. Just throwing that out there for anyone who wanted to know.

Then there's Odin.
Wow, what a douche.
I totally don't foreshadow anything. ;P

Then Sif.
I wanted to write her differently than Sigyn. I mean, Sigyn has got the whole oblivious thing going on and, overall, she's a pretty chill person. She just sorta goes with the flow. Sif is bit more uptight. She's irritable sometimes, impulsive at others. Where Sigyn has spent a great deal of her life being bored, Sif has spent that time being shunned and looked down on. She's got feelings. And stuff. Yeah.

Next chapter is going be a bit longer than this with more adventure-y stuff. If you guys have any questions, feel free to ask in the comments!
I cannot express in words how much your comments and kudos mean to me. You all are amazing and beautiful people and I love you all, you spectacular humans.
Frank Faces Reality

Chapter Summary

Darcy meets Tyr. Loki jumps. Frank and Fenrir face reality. Frigga's done.

Chapter Notes

Quick note before I start:
Darcy and Loki are fourteen now.
Which means Thor and Sif are about 16.

That is all.
Love, Q

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy trudged slowly through the long, golden halls of the palace as the twilight sun shone across the high pillars and magnificent statues of the kings past.

She was exhausted, completely and utterly wrung out.

She’d been on Asgard for the weekend, starting Friday afternoon and had finally come to an end Sunday night.

Lately, she found herself overwhelmed with work. Her school studies were a great deal more time consuming when she actually did the homework. It wasn’t the quality of the assignments so much as it was the quantity. Between being advisor to a prince, soccer practice, and school, she didn’t have a nick of time to spare.

There was so much to do, but she made it work.

Each morning she got out of bed, finished up any homework she hadn’t gotten to do the night before, and woke up Loki because apparently his bed on Asgard was nonexistent therefore he’d taken to sleeping with her every night of the week. Darcy didn’t mind.

On the contrary, it calmed her down a lot when Loki was present. Just him being there, sitting on her bed with his legs stretched out in front of him, pondering his notes and magic, set her at ease. He was a constant. No matter what happened he was there to rub the back of her neck when it ached from being bent over a desk all day, or put her in bed when she fell asleep at the library.

Waking him up in the morning was habitual. Sometimes she whapped him with a pillow, other times she turned up the death metal radio station up to hearing damage levels and danced on the bed. Occasionally, if she wasn’t feeling rushed, she would snuggle up to his side and describe, in great detail, any strange dream she had.

After Loki was up, she packed her bag with binders and books and got dressed.
Mundane ways of dressing one’s self were somehow below Loki of Asgard and he chose to do so magically. Sometimes if she was behind schedule, she’d ask Loki to do the same to her. It was those days that everyone at school gawked at her Chanel trousers and Alexander McQueen tops, each were shades of either green or black. Her outfit was always accented by some expensive piece of gold jewelry.

Darcy had to admit, Loki had style.

But she really didn’t like going to school looking like she robbed a runway show.

Then there was school.

Darcy never entered that wretched building lest she was armed with a travel cup of coffee because her classes were as boring as the day was long. Though, she found high school to be miserable, it was quite refreshing after three years in middle school Hel. At least, as she progressed in her education, with only four years left till college, she was able to advance to higher classes without moving up another grade. She now took physics with the juniors and chemistry with the seniors. Her government class was useful for covering the basics. Biology was interesting enough. All in all, it wasn’t so bad if she didn’t count the homework.

Soccer practice was immediately after school. She and Grace had made the team and every day from three to five in the afternoon, she was practicing in a field. The good news was that the school season was up until April. The bad news was the her mother and Mrs. Wilson, Grace’s mother, had conspired to make their daughters suffer through indoor soccer over the winter months so they wouldn’t lose any skills.

Darcy almost cried. Almost.

Homework was, to be completely honest, a bitch. Homework sucked.

And when she said ‘sucked’ what she really meant was ‘sucked time’. Believe it or not, Darcy Lewis had outdone herself as advisor. She had taken her role in the Asgardian government to heart. Every day she received ravens from all across Asgard. Issues that needed her help, parties to attend, things to inform Loki of, concerns of the people, change in crime rates, and so on.

It was a lot.

As soon as she got back from practice, Loki would whisk her away to Asgard where firstly she had her lessons with Frigga then the rest of her duties which she must carry out. Usually, she would eat at home or her mom would buy her a Subway sandwich on the way back to her house. But there were the odd days where she would have to eat during her time with Frigga.

The Queen of Asgard, as Darcy was coming to discover, was a relentless teacher. It made sense to Darcy why Odin had even the slightest inkling of how to run a government.

This mad woman was a driving force.

Her lessons had no aim in particular, which is what Darcy found frustrating. She had to learn the location and names of all forty-two of Frigga’s spies. She had to learn their original vocations, their current quests and their areas of expertise. Sometimes, she would have to give them instruction on where to go and what to do, each order based off of a puzzle given to her by the queen.

But that wasn’t the half of it.

Frigga had her sit by the window and learn the stars by name and constellation, she had her go out
into the city and speak to specific people about the weather, and, on special circumstances, Darcy would go see Heimdall.

Darcy liked Heimdall. If she was a few millennia older, she would have asked him to marry her. He was great. He totally knew she was Midgardian, but he seemed not to care. Her purpose there was to be educated on the bifrost and how an All-seer saw Yggdrasil.

And Darcy, being Darcy, had to ask what was beyond Yggdrasil. Her first thoughts were of the map, which she had not had a whole lot of spare time to piece together. Heimdall had proved fairly informed. He told her that there were worlds out there, unbeknownst to many in Yggdrasil. It was too far away to be of much significance to anyone on Asgard. He then gave her a very stern, very knowing look and said that it was dangerous and that short ladies without advanced magical prowess should refrain from such explorations.

Darcy smirked and idly thought of Loki. He could technically be considered ‘hers’ and he had magical prowess. Problem solved.

Curious Darcy couldn’t help but keep asking questions. She inquired as to what would happen if someone were to jump off the bifrost bridge.

Heimdall explained in a somber tone that the space between realms was empty. The reason that no one could travel between them without portal or bridge was the vast nothingness that stretched between worlds. He claimed that there were great distances were even the light of stars did not reach. It separated the realms and the galaxy Beyond.

It was so dark there, that Heimdall could not see.

He sounded so sad at the thought of empty space that Darcy let the subject drop and did not bring it up again.

After her lessons with Frigga were over, Darcy would retire to either the library, Loki’s room, or her own room that she had been given as a result of being advisor. Loki had installed shelves for her and she kept a great many reference books around her. Loki would sit with her while she worked, helping her when she asked for it.

But recently, Loki had been preoccupied with other things.

Collegiums.

Darcy was sure Loki had fallen in love with them. Not for their lessons, Loki didn’t take lessons. He only watched other people take lessons. He watched their errors and the materials they used. He used their mistakes and their accidental projections of magic as inspiration for his own work. Darcy felt a little left behind in the magic department.

She had chosen the route of politics and Loki was swirling down a magical void that was at the end of scientific understanding. His magic had reached a very fine point where, to explain the magical and mathematical connections, one needed extensive Asgardian vocabulary. Some of the things he did were not even applicable to Midgardian science as it was. Darcy understood a great deal, but she hadn’t gotten the time to fully listen to Loki’s magical lectures.

Then there was Odin.

Damn Odin.

Darcy hated Odin.
Because of the sheer amount of work Darcy did for the Asgardian public, many of her inner-realm interactions required Odin’s consent. Loki’s authority did not stretch everywhere and Odin was difficult to negotiate with.

First off, it was obvious he didn’t like her. He tried to discount her credibility as an advisor and treated her like she knew absolutely nothing. At the beginning, when at first their private meetings began, Odin would ignore her. He was passive about each of her proposals and dismissed them as if they had no value.

That’s when Darcy started getting aggressive. She decided that Odin was too much of a hard-headed old man to even glance at her perspective when delivered by a polite, refined lady. She was forced to obtain some fierceness when dealing with Odin. Fire is what got to him. Not sarcasm or rudeness, but passion for words.

She had to be everything that Asgardian ladies were not. Loud and unyielding.

It was only after he was boiling with anger did she start to get a reaction out of the old coot. The issue with their association was not seeing the problem. Both of them saw the problems quite plainly, as they were both students of Frigga and had been taught to see the tribulations of certain situations. No, they struggled with coming up with a solution.

It was like *The Matrix*. Darcy was all for the red pill while Odin was the blue pill. He thought the key to Asgard’s struggles was to keep everyone ignorant of delicate issues and then sort them out privately. Darcy thought that people should know what they’re up against in order to be a working part of the system Odin had created.

Keeping people ignorant would work until they found out they’d been played. Darcy didn’t want to be there when the truth of Odin’s deceit was finally dug up.

Darcy noticed that all members of the royal family had a selfish streak. They thought about themselves first and Asgard second. Even Loki and Frigga did this.

It was subtle; one would not think it at first glance. But by getting to know them as Darcy had, she saw the truth of their priorities.

Thor had abandoned most of his princely duties, lest his attendance be required for a feast. He was the most blatant about his selfishness. He was enjoying his youth, scampering about, not accepting any responsibility. Personally, Darcy could understand why he was struggling. He was a teenage boy. He wanted adventure and fun and the palace walls were no place for that.

Nonetheless, he was born into his role, and he should embrace it even if he did not ask for it, especially since he intended to be king one day.

Then there was Odin. Obviously, he valued appearances.

Bor had not been the best of kings. After his war with the Dark Elves, he pretty much gave up on Asgard and it fell to ruin.

Well, not completely, but it had been a mess: famine, shortages of materials, weak military status. The Asgardian people were a wreck.

Then Bor died and Odin took the throne with his weird helm and stunning new wife. Together, they built the Realm Eternal into an everlasting light upon Yggdrasil. The war with Jotunheim helped, but the realm was quite well off before the kindling hate between the worlds began.
But Odin had his flaws. He wanted Asgard to look imposing, and it was, but he never looked out for the future. Frigga chided her on being impulsive, but she had nothing on Odin. If, for even the slightest moment, he thought that something would be a good idea, he grabbed on with both hands, not even willing to think of the consequences.

Just the other day he authorized the production of swords that could burn through one’s flesh. They had not been used since the Great War and everyone knew their purpose was in killing Frost Giants.

So why was Odin having them made?

Because he thought that the magically heated weapons could also be applicable to other enemies.

What Odin didn’t think about was the perceived threat to Jotunheim and all other realms that Asgard did not have an alliance with.

Now, the best (worst) part of this state of affairs was that Darcy couldn’t do anything about it.

She might have been a powerful and influential leader of the Asgardian public, but she had no control over foreign complications. Loki did and she could advise Loki on what to do, but he refused to stay dedicated to his duties as well.

Darcy loved Loki with all her heart, but he could be stubborn as Hel sometimes. His egotism was much like Thor’s, though better hidden. He studied. He worked on magic and focused his energy on scientific research. He didn’t abandon all of his meetings and duties, but he neglected to care as much for them as he once did. A couple of years ago, they were his source of entertainment. But Loki’s mind moved faster than most. He was always thinking of innovation and he didn’t have the patience for people that couldn’t keep up with what he was saying.

His progressive mindsets were obstinate to just about every member of the court and it frustrated him when they could not so easily see his ways. That’s why he had Darcy. She had the fortitude, if not the time, to convince anyone of anything.

Plus, he really liked magic more than politics.

Then there was Frigga. The Queen was Darcy’s heroine, but she supposed, even her greatest role model could not go without having a few flaws.

At first, Frigga’s mysterious ways entranced Darcy. She found them awe-inspiring. She still had a great deal of appreciation for the Allmother’s ability to maintain absolute discretion if need be.

But, to some extent, it bothered Darcy.

When Frigga became Queen of Asgard, she disposed of her throne to dissuade the people of Asgard from seeing her as a public icon. She did this to hide her own work and keep secret her underground dealings.

What Frigga didn’t think about was how that affected the Asgardian world. Her decision made her seem inferior to Odin, which she was not, and it went hand in hand with the Allfather’s shaping of Asgardian women’s social expectations. Her reticent use of magic pushed away the regality and nobility of the practice. To the Asgardian people, it looked as though she handed Odin the throne and then spent the rest of her time making tapestries.

Everything that Frigga had done, Odin was credited for.
All of the royals were just a little headstrong and a little self-absorbed. They didn’t mean to be, but they were. Darcy figured that if she was handed the responsibility of a realm as they were, she might feel the same.

She would probably never know.

Taking a deep breath through the nose, Darcy continued on to the library where she hoped she might find Loki.

That weekend had been the absolute worst. Lessons with Frigga had been rigorous, she spent almost all of Saturday arguing with Odin, and now, on Sunday, she was finally departing from a meeting with Thryheim representatives, including High Lord Tyr.

Darcy didn’t know if she liked Tyr or not. He was easy to work with. He had an easy smile and was fairly open minded. But he also glorified Odin and was far too willing to do anything the king asked him to. He had utter faith in his king.

His face confused Darcy. He had a boyish look about him; so lighthearted and carefree. It was only when Darcy began talking during their meeting did he begin to look melancholy.

No doubt it was because of their topic of discussion of the upcoming census. Thryheim had lost more people than usual that year. Not from famine or warring, but rather old age. Life ending as it does.

Even so, Darcy noticed something very familiar about Tyr. His nose and the shape of his jaw, along with the hue of his skin were all known to her. It was only when he pursed his lips together in thought did Darcy realize how similar his traits were to Sif’s.

She refrained from prodding, of course. But she spent the rest of that meeting distracted by Lord Tyr’s face and posture. Sif looked like a noblewoman. It was hard to describe, but no matter how low someone had sunk in the social hierarchy, they still managed to have a look about them.

Darcy struggled with that. She did not look like a noblewoman at all. She looked common, unlike Sif and Sigyn who emanated pride and grace. It wasn’t that surprising being that she was Midgardian, and she wasn’t really aiming to be courted, so it didn’t really matter what she looked like. Even so, to some minor extent, she desired to be pretty like them. She didn’t dwell on her appearance, letting that small seed of jealousy fall on the barren land of her vanity, a place of which she had no time to tend to.

She came to the end of the hall and stretched, wishing Loki would just come and find her. Maybe if she lay down on the ground and started crying about the essay for physics she had to write and hadn’t even started he would appear. It was due second hour tomorrow morning and she was so dead.

“Advisor Darcy!” a cheery voice called after her and Darcy turned to see High Lord Tyr.

“Lord Tyr.” She offered him a small curtsy. She would have done more, but she was afraid she might fall over.

He took a second to approach her, jogging up like he wasn’t the boss of a whole province. She could see why people liked him. His actions were childish, but charming. “My Lady, I was wondering if I might have a word or two with you.”

Darcy looked down the hall in the direction of the library, then to Tyr, outfitted in casual pants and a tunic. His hopeful expression was difficult to say ‘no’ to. “Lord Tyr, I—“
"It won't take long, I swear it." He grinned placing a hand over his heart. "Shall I escort you?"

He offered her his arm and Darcy gave him a skeptical look before taking it. They took a few steps and Darcy had enough experience to know it was better to start with an honest compliment when addressing lords. "I admire your ability to keep Thryheim neutral. That's not an easy task when you've got the Norns breathing down your neck at every second."

Tyr let loose a sparkling laugh. "You flatter me, Advisor Darcy. Though I will admit, that Lord Bjarte is quite the task."

Darcy's smile turned to a grimace. Under normal conditions, she might be more able to share Tyr's enthusiasm, but it had been a long day. "Forgive me Lord Tyr, I am quite tired. The last couple of days have been difficult."

The Lord's grin softened and he placed his hand gently over hers. "Please, call me Tyr. I have heard a great many things about you and your prince, Advisor. I wanted to express my appreciation for what you do."

It wasn't the first time that someone had told her that, but coming from Tyr it seemed genuine. "Thank you, Tyr. And call me Darcy."

His eyes brightened with a familiar spark. "I must ask you something, Darcy."

"Please do," she said as they rounded a corner, taking them closer to the library.

He hesitated, quite obviously. His face conveyed every one of his emotions so plainly. "You are young for an advisor, similar in age to the two princes."

"Yeah," Darcy confirmed, easily slipping back into her mortal speech patterns. It happened when she was tired.

Tyr didn't seem to notice. "Prince Thor has a friend, a lady. Her name is—"

"Sif," Darcy filled in, feeling rather smug about how her suspicions were looking to be quite accurate.

"Yes," he said, his voice dipping into a solemn tone. "I wonder, is she well?"

Darcy nodded, thinking to Sif. Physically she was healthy, but Darcy couldn't help but notice how sad she seemed lately. She had her ideas as to why that was. Something told her it had to do with a certain blonde lady who was courting a prince. But Darcy didn't know enough to make any firm accusations. They would figure it out.

"She is in good health, one of the fiercest of the training warriors, and a good friend of mine," Darcy said, stifling a yawn. "Pardon me."

It was clear that Tyr hadn't noticed her concealed expression of exhaustion. She could have died on the floor and he wouldn't have noticed. "Darcy," he laughed loudly as in elation, "how familiar are you with the ranks of the military based on skill?"

"Quite," she answered immediately. It was true. Being an advisor, it was a good thing to know.

The lord was nearly skipping with all the energy in his walk. "In your opinion, and I am trusting your word on this, what are the chances of her becoming one of the elite?"
Darcy had actually spent a great deal of time thinking on this. She had started more work with the military, being that she already had her finger in every other political pie. As far as soldier ranks went, Sif was well on her way to achieving elite status. “I’d say that she’s almost there. A couple more years. Sooner if she’s given an opportunity to prove herself.”

Tyr was so filled with elation that he released her arm, clapping his hands in joy. “Ah! Darcy! This is absolutely wonderful!” He took her hands and spun them in a circle. Darcy couldn’t help but giggle a bit. There weren’t many lords, let alone people, in the Asgardian court that would act so freely. She had a feeling that Tyr couldn’t really care less. He was too caught up in his jubilation.

“I’m glad this pleases you!” Darcy laughed along with him, some of the tension easing from her shoulders with every chuckle.

He sighed, twirling her around once more before continuing their walk. “Darcy, might I confide in you?”

“Sure,” she answered, positive that the Lord’s actions were all that she really needed to know.

“I pray that you might keep this between us.” He brought his voice down to a low whisper, pulling them into an alcove. Darcy thought that this was far more conspicuous looking than literally anything else he could have done to tell her this secret. But she let him because it was amusing and Tyr was officially her new favorite High Lord.

He brought her in close and began to speak frantically. “Sif and I are brother and sister by blood. She was always my favorite, so full of life and fire. I love her and I miss her dearly. Being that she has been disowned by my parents…well, I have not been able to associate with her.

“The terms of her abandonment are that she might become part of our family again if she reaches the elite. My mother and father had no faith that she would do this. They thought she would die in the streets. But what you have told me…” he sighed happily. “…it is the most wonderful thing.

“When Sif becomes a part of the elite guard, I will be able to see her again. She is my sister and I always felt that we understood each other. I have been lonely without her. I fear that our parents will not accept her once she is a warrior of such status. But there is nothing she could do to dissuade me from welcoming her back into my house.

“She could refuse to marry, refuse to birth children, wear nothing but corn husks…I really do not care,” he finished, his shoulders relaxing as if he had just let the weight of the world roll from them.

Darcy chuckled a bit. “Would you like me to tell her?”

Tyr shook his head, almost violently. “No. I beseech you, Advisor Darcy, any contact would extend the time in which we cannot communicate.”

She nodded in understanding. “Alright then. I won’t tell her.”

Lord Tyr’s smile lit up the tiny confined space they stood in that was separated from the hall by a drape. Darcy squeezed his hand in a friendly gesture. “I’m glad I could help.”

He beamed, taking her other hand and pulling her back out into the corridor. “Darcy, you have pleased me more than you could ever know!” He spun her around in a dizzying circle until her giggles became uncontrollable and giddy.

“You’re crazy, Tyr!” she laughed and he put his hands on her shoulders to steady her.
“Indeed,” he agreed, bowing once and taking both her hands in his, giving them each a kiss.
“Thank you, Darcy. I hope to see you again. I am ever so glad that the capital finally has some
other competent being besides Odin running it.”

Darcy was tempted to disagree, but she chose to let Tyr keep his good mood. “We’ll meet again.
Maybe I’ll come to Thryheim.”

“You will always be welcome in my house,” he said, kissing her hands again before turning on his
heel and walking away with so much vigor his stride could have classified as skipping. “Farewell
Darcy!”

She waved to him, feeling a lot less tired than she had earlier. With a small smile on her face she
turned on the ball of her foot to go find Loki in the library, nearly wetting her pants when she
instead spun into a tall, beautiful lady with white blonde hair.

“Sigyn!” Darcy gasped, stumbling backwards.

Sigyn had a disapproving smirk on her face, her arms crossed as she ran her gaze up and down
Darcy’s shaken figure.

Darcy held up her hands. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Sigyn raised a delicate brow, her smirk radiating mirth.

Darcy was blushing now, her face and neck red with embarrassment. “Sigyn, let’s be real here.
Tyr…Lord Tyr, I mean, is…well…he’s a lord. And…he’s too old for me! Also, he…we’re
friends.” Darcy stuttered out. “He just wanted to know something and—Will you stop giving me
that look!?”

Sigyn finally broke down, bursting into a fit of hysterias. “I cannot believe it! Advisor Darcy and
High Lord Tyr. He is enthusiastic, is he not?”

Darcy didn’t miss the double meaning. She’d introduced Sigyn to Shakespeare. From thereon in,
her speech was an endless stream of sexy insinuations. “Sigyn! Nothing happened. And please, be
quiet!” she shouted in a whisper.

Sigyn didn’t even start to quiet down. In fact, she laughed harder and Darcy lunged forwards to
clap a hand over her friend’s mouth. “What is that charming little rhyme you used to say when
Loki first showed interest in me?” Sigyn panted out, weakly fighting off Darcy’s attempts. “’Darcy
and Tyr, sitting in a tree…’?”

“Sigyn!” Darcy protested, backing away and stomping her foot. “Nothing is happening!”

“Not anymore it isn’t.”

Darcy sighed, shaking her head, attempting to will the blood to drain from her ears. “Have you seen
Loki?”

Sigyn ‘tsked’ the blushing brunette disappointedly. “First a High Lord, now a Prince. Aren’t we
busy?”

Darcy crossed her arms. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

Sigyn grin widened. “Am I?”
“You and Loki are courting, you egg!” Darcy argued, throwing her hands up in the air.

Sigyn snorted loudly, shaking her head. “Very well. I shall stop.” She took a few calming breaths. “I have not seen Loki. He was not in the library all day. He mentioned yesterday going into the city.”

Darcy grimaced. Great. Now she had to track down a magic prince in the largest city on Asgard. That should be fun. It wasn’t like she had work to do or anything. “Did he say where?”

“The Collegium,” Sigyn answered and Darcy groaned.

“There are, like, twenty-four of those!” She complained, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Sigyn patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. “I’m sure you will find him.”

She brushed past her friend and Darcy looked after her incredulously. “Where are you going?”

“To bed,” Sigyn called back, a smile in her voice.

Darcy made a face as the blonde lady rushed away. She could add this encounter to the list of reasons why Sigyn and Loki’s courtship was going to end soon. Firstly because they hardly spent time together and secondly because Sigyn, as Darcy saw it, was infatuated with someone else entirely.

She sighed dramatically, her fatigue returning as she set off down a flight of stairs. “To the stables it is.”

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Loki landed his longship, bursting with excitement.

Oh, he had done it now. Darcy was going to be so pleased.

He had potentially found another infinity stone.

He’d been sitting in one of the Collegium archives, pouring over a few tomes when something on the map caught his eye.

Now, the map was set up to depict the different realms from an outside perspective. Each realm was made up of a cluster of tightly grouped words and phrases. The areas of space between the realms were blank spots, strips of nothingness that separated the realms.

Loki saw what at first he suspected to be a speck of dirt nestled in the space between Asgard and Svartalfheim. Upon further inspection, he found that it was not a speck of dirt at all, it was a word. A precious little word in the Asgardian language as it was during the time of Bor’s reign.

Naturally, the rest of Loki’s day had been spent finding a portal that would take him between the realms to a specific point. It was fairly simple being that there was virtually nothing between realms. Any point out there would be easy to find if he searched correctly.

And he did.

The whole process would have gone faster if Darcy had been with him, but this was a surprise for her. They were in need of an adventure.

As soon as his longship was safely harbored, he set off towards Darcy’s last destination which had
undoubtedly been her preferred conference room where she had a view of the city. Jörmungandr and Fenrir followed in his wake, making sounds at each other.

His day had started off rather well. Darcy had slept in his bed last night, which for some reason he found extremely gratifying. As pleasant as it was, he had to wake up in time to return her to her room before anyone saw them together.

He’d woken up before Darcy that morning, which meant that he had the rare opportunity to rouse her from slumber.

Laying there beside her, he thought of all the possible ways to get her up as revenge for the numerous rude awakenings she’d given him. He was contemplating jumping on the bed when Darcy stirred in her sleep, her hand grappling at the space beside her where Loki had slept.

That small little action made him stop and look at her face. It was the dumbest thing he could have possibly done. He hardly saw Darcy’s sleeping face because she woke up before him and buried her face in pillows while she slept. But that morning, her face was turned to the side, lips parted and breathing slow. Loki had sighed, muttering bitterly to himself about the next time he had this opportunity, he would not waste it simply because Darcy was endearing in her sleep.

He burrowed down into the sheets, taking her hand and holding their linked fingers between them on the mattress. She had slept for another ten minutes before it was crucial that he get her back to her own room.

After Darcy was on her way to see the Allmother for lessons, Loki threw himself into work. His attendance was only necessary at one short meeting that morning. He listened to a few idiot lords talk at each other about things he had told them the solutions to months prior, and then quickly made his way into the city.

Loki decided he loved the city.

People. Life. Things happening in every direction. It was a living, breathing place. It was easy, in a body of culture and expression, to become a cell in the stream of activity. He liked watching everything happen. Not participating like Thor, but observing. He liked watching people smile and laugh, cry and be angered.

He liked it when he saw secret things happening that no one else noticed. The imperfections of this system that made it flow that much better.

But there was more to the city than just the people.

There was study.

Loki had never dreamed, not in a million years, that collegiums of magic could exist without him knowing of them.

Then he attended one. He took notes on how the Asgardian sorceresses learned and how they were taught. He read the books and practiced the demonstrations. He examined their past works and tomes, practice instruments and energy focus techniques.

And, as a result, he was extremely unimpressed.

People who had been studying magic far longer than he could do less than him a millennium ago. They taught magic wrong. He didn’t know how else to phrase it except that they were wrong.
The professors of magic taught it as if it were an object. Like a ball of clay that the user must bend and push to form it into what they wanted. They spent so much time on control, trying to make that ball cooperate.

What they failed to realize was that magic was not an object. It was a part of oneself. His mother explained to him when he was but a child that magic was a muscle. It could be trained and flexed, manipulated with passion and focus.

Loki liked to think about it, not with his mother’s interpretation, but rather Darcy’s.

Darcy could not ‘use’ magic. She couldn’t project anything. Everything magical she had exposure to, she felt. Loki understood this. Being as advanced as he was, magic was second nature and it was easy to forget about something as simple in sensing magical pulses. It was just like any other sense. He forgot it was there until an especially potent source got his attention.

But it wasn’t like that for Darcy. She was a mortal. She had the potential for magic, but it developed slowly. Sensing magic was new to her and because of that, she had an adept ability to feel.

Magic wasn’t directly tied to emotion. When he said ‘feeling’ he was referring to a more physical sense. It was difficult to describe because the sensation was so internal. But, in short, magic was a transfer of energy from himself to another thing. How he chose to transfer the magic made all the difference.

Loki wished that Asgardians could better use magic, but he had no way of teaching them. He was a prince. A prince with responsibilities that he was well aware he was neglecting.

He felt terrible about this.

Asgard deserved better from its prince than what he was offering and it was immoral for him to be spending so much time out of the palace and away from the dull life of being royal.

Then there was Darcy.

She was stressed. She tried not to show that she was stressed, but she was. Her eyes had adorned little bags that refused to go away; her mind was either buzzing from too much caffeine or slurred from so little sleep. Her muscles remained tense no matter how many times he tried to work out the knots. He wanted so badly to hug her and make that anxious beat of her heart slow down.

Thus far, he’d only found a couple ways to calm her.

The first was that he did her work. She hated this. Darcy hated, with a passion, anytime he tried to get between her and her duties. More willing was she to let him do her math homework than write replies to the Lord of this or Lady of that. The most Loki could sum it up to was that Darcy enjoyed her doing what she did and was completely oblivious to the tolls it was taking on her body and mind.

It was because of this that he was going to stop his daily excursions into the city. She might be his advisor, but he was her prince. She had slowly started to pile on more responsibility that she adamantly insisted on keeping. So he would gradually ease some of it away. Darcy’s health was worth any amount of tedious council meetings.

He recalled the second way with a particular fondness as he saw the human that so often stole away with his thoughts ambling down a golden flight of stairs. Her hair had fallen slightly from its style, loose tendrils skirting over her shoulders.
“Darcy.” He spoke her name as he approached her quickly.

“Loki,” she sighed in relief, all but collapsing into his embrace.

A very large part of him wanted to scold Darcy for doing so much. She didn’t have to. She accused him of being negligent to his personal health while she herself did not even give her mind a rest. But he refrained. He had learned from past experiences that telling Darcy what she could and could not do resulted in him giving way to her large blue eyes and pouty lips.

Also it would cause an argument and he did not want either of those to happen. Their last major row had been on Jotunheim and he did not wish to repeat that.

Soon though, he would have to do something.

Darcy took his hands and brought his palms to her cheeks so they cupped her face. “Can you do the thing?”

He smiled at her reference to his second means of calming her and himself.

It was magic, but not in the sense that he directly relieved her of stress. It was a strange bit of sorcery that he’d been playing around with. Beginning as nothing of great importance, it had manifested into something more.

It was himself. His energy that he projected onto Darcy through magic.

In other words, he let her feel him magically. Darcy told him it was like sniffing a Loki scented Yankee Candle, strong enough to make her eyes water, but in a good way. He surmised that to mean that his magic overwhelmed her senses so she felt nothing but him. There was no Asgard, no school, no soccer, no social expectations. There was only the two of them.

It was times like these where Loki wished Darcy could use magic. How was it that he could find a long lost portal to an infinity stone in a day but not a pesky witch who grew apples?

If Darcy were to eat an apple, her potential and magical capacity would expand immensely. She would be able to share with him all that he shared with her.

She closed her eyes, keeping her hands on his.

Darcy was the only person he allowed to feel him so closely. He felt odd in saying that there was something intimate about the gesture. Anyone he used magic around would be able to feel the energy with enough practice. But projecting onto Darcy as he did, was the difference between seeing someone do something and them doing something for you to see. It was the difference between being heard and being spoken to…shaking hands and being held.

Letting her in so close did not feel abnormal. Quite the contrary, it felt right. He wondered idly if Darcy ever started courting someone, would they find ways to relieve her anxiety better than he? Would she still ask this of him?

His musings were cut short by a heavy sigh from Darcy and he pulled his magic away, causing her bottom lip to stick out slightly. “Loki…”

“Darcy, this is important,” he told her softly and she groaned loudly enough for Jörmungandr and Fenrir to look up at her with apprehensively.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out the map. “I’ve found another.”
Immediately, Darcy looked more alert. “You’re joking.”

“Not at all,” he assured, pointing to the word that was so tiny Darcy had to put her face close up to the map to see it.

“Why is it so tiny?” she asked. “And why is it in the middle of space?”

“I do not know,” Loki answered contemplatively. “I have found the portal—“

“You already have the portal?” Darcy interrupted.

He scowled at her surprise. “Obviously. I will take you to it when you are well rested and have eaten properly.”

The face she made was so disappointed that he almost felt bad for what he’d said. “What? No! Let’s just go now. Just to see the portal.”

“Darcy…” he began to protest.

She made an irritated noise in the back of her throat. “Loki, if you’ve found another infinity stone, we can’t just ignore it! We should go. Just to make sure that it’s there and I know where it is.”

Loki clenched his jaw, not saying anything. He had a choice. She was tired. Exhausted really. But he did want to show her the portal and, he supposed, if they did not use the portal, there was no harm in taking her there.

Darcy let her forehead fall against his shoulder then proceeded to make arguments as to why he should show her.

“Fine,” he relented. “We will go now. But do you not have an essay due tomorrow?”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Shh, if you don’t say it out loud, it doesn’t exist. Let’s go.”

***

“Nope,” Darcy said, shaking her head and backing away from the edge of the longship. “Nope. Nope. Nopity nope nopesters.”

Loki crossed his arms. “You asked to know where it was.”

Darcy put a hand over her heart, swallowing hard and timidly peeking over the side of the longship to the massive gorge beneath them. He’d flown them for about an hour until they approached a barren expanse of earth, littered with rocky terrain. Down the center of this landscape was a crack so wide and deep that it made the Grand Canyon look like a footprint in the sand.

Once they were over the deepest part of said chasm, he stopped and explained his findings.

“This is very interesting,” Loki said, pacing the longship. “It is not a natural portal. It has been made by an Asgardian, or Asgardians more likely. It was poorly made. Look at how evidently it’s placed! I found it in less than a day. However,” Loki paused to grin at Jörmungandr, “I am impressed at how inaccessible it is.”

Darcy was turning a bit green and was leaning heavily on the edge of the ship. “What do you mean by ‘inaccessible’?”

Loki shrugged. “The portal is at the bottom of the gorge. To break past the barrier we would have
to be falling at a certain speed which, if my calculations are correct, should be our combined terminal velocity.”

Darcy shook her head as if trying to clear away some misunderstanding. “How do you even know this?”

He grimaced, not wishing to tell her how exactly he knew. “Mild experimentation.”

Instantly, Darcy’s sick expression was replaced with incredulous frustration. “Loki, please, dear god, tell me you did not spend the entire day jumping out of longships.”

Pursing his lips he looked her in the eyes. “I did not spend the entire day jumping out of longships.”

She threw an arm over her face, an antagonized sigh slipping through her lips. “Lies.”

He waved her off. “That is not the important part. Clearly I am fine. What we should be concerned about is the fact that this portal,” he gestured absently to the vast dark space beneath them, “was created. It was intentionally put here, which could mean that this speck, this place between Asgard and Svartalfheim, was designed specifically for hiding this particular infinity stone.

“We won’t go after it tonight. But I think we should practice the process in which we would travel through this portal. I believe that there will be some minor impact in going through it that could be dangerous. I will create a simulation to help condition…”

Loki continued on about his science and Darcy tried to focus on not seeing stars. She wasn’t scared of heights per say. She was more afraid of the falling bit. The bit that was pretty much precisely what she had to do to get through the damn portal.

Fenrir was giving her a worried look and she tried to smile reassuringly at him, but it wasn’t really working. She took a few calming breaths, finding her figurative balls and shakily looked down. That was it for Darcy. The hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach that accompanied her fear won over and she promptly puked her brains out.

It wasn’t even the quiet kind of puking. It was the all-out, nose-fountain, I-had-corn-in-my-soup-for-lunch barf. The only bright side was that she puked so hard, it didn’t get on her and managed to all land outside the ship. Unfortunately, the force at which her body projected said vomit was enough to throw her off balance.

Let it be known that Darcy was not particularly graceful.

Nor did she have fantastic balance.

Nor good depth perception.

So when she held out her hand to use the curved ledge of the ship for stability, her hand instead met the empty air outside her safe floating vehicle. With some rather eloquently shouted curse words, she promptly fell into the bottomless pit of death and horror.

Loki heard Darcy get sick and immediately rushed to help her, but by the time he was at her side, she was already plummeting towards the portal.

He made an irritated sound, quickly doing the math in his head.

At this rate he wouldn’t be able to magically bring her back to him without leaving some part of her behind and she didn’t have a large enough mass to get up to speed and break the portal barrier
without him. He could magically bring her back after she stopped accelerating, which would be soon. Jörmungandr was practicing his skills as an ouroboros while Fenrir whined, getting up on the side of the ship and preparing to jump.

“Fenrir, don’t you dare—“

It was too late. Both his ridiculous pets had leapt from the ship after Darcy. Loki threw his head back, exhaling through his nose and frowning at the sky. “Oh gods, give me strength,” he said before taking a running start and neatly diving off the ship after his friends.

***

In all honesty, Darcy did mean to do the whole ‘I’m going to scream as I fall to my death’ type thing.

But, hey, it wasn’t every day that you fall to your death and she decided she would make the most of it. And why not curse the universe and blame her enemies?

“GOD DAMMIT, MOTHER OF HEL!” she screamed, her voice getting lost in the whipping wind around her. “ODIN IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT! OH MY—“ her words were cut short by a leather clad arm wrapping around her middle and the cool brush of scales across her cheek.

“Loki!” she gasped as he shifted them midair.

“Darcy!” he shouted over the wind, “You could have told me heights made you ill!”

She squeezed her eyes shut as they plunged further into the darkness. She couldn’t even see the ground. “I didn’t know, okay?!“

He made a few aggravated sounds, turning her in his arms so that they faced each other and Frank was trapped between them. Fenrir seemed to be hugging his body onto Loki’s back, gripping on the leather with his teeth. “Straighten your limbs Darcy!” Loki directed. “We will have to reach terminal velocity before we can penetrate the portal!”

“I thought you said we weren’t going tonight!” Darcy yelled, maneuvering herself as he directed. He tightened his arms around her leaning forwards so they were speeding, headfirst towards the ground. “That was before you fell from the damn ship!”

“It was an accident!” she sassed defensively, her frustration overpowering her fright.

“So was Thor! But you don’t see me forgiving Odin anytime soon!” He grinned as they rapidly approached the bottom of the gorge.

Darcy choked out a loud humorless laugh that was interrupted the realization of how close they were to the ground. “Hahaha…ohhh my god! LOKI YOU ARE SUCH A LITTLE—“

They passed through the portal before she could she could finish her insult.

Usually, when they passed through a portal, it felt a little like jumping off a swing. The passage under Darcy’s bed for instance, was quite a pleasant trip. Fun even.

This portal was not fun. It did not feel like jumping off a swing. It felt like Odin was stirring her innards with Gungnir while being tossed around inside a blender.

Needless to say, it was probably one of the most miserable experiences of Darcy’s life thus far.
Even when the gut churning sensation had died down and the world felt like it was existent again, she kept her hold on Loki. Frank slithered between them, finding his way out of Darcy’s hold.

“Darcy…” Loki said, running a hand over her hair which had come completely undone from its braids. “We are safe.”

She didn’t trust her stomach not to throw itself up. Her legs tightened around Loki’s waist and she was probably choking him with the strength at which she held herself to his sturdy, unmoving, solid form.

“Darcy,” Loki tried again. “We made it through. Are you alright?”

At this she brought her face away from his neck where she’d been hiding, eyes narrowed and attitude embittered.

He grinned with a kind of teasing mirth that made Darcy want to push him off the end of the bifrost. “I take it that you have been better.”

Her bitterness intensified and her features morphed into a scowl. Finally she trusted her stomach enough to talk. “You know what, Mischief? I am actually really great.”

“Really?” he asked, raising one of his finely shaped brows. “All fine?”

“Peachy,” she confirmed.

He nodded as if assured. “Very well. I suppose that now, since you are so secure in your well-being, that you might release me.”

Instinctively she tensed. “Let’s not be hasty. I almost died. What if the ground is made of lava?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Believe me, what little ground there is, it is not made of lava.”

Darcy swallowed hard. “What little ground’?”

“I will not let go of you Darcy, but we need to discuss where we are,” he said seriously.

“Fine,” Darcy relented shortly, gently unclamping her legs from her friend and touching her toes to the ground. Satisfied with the solidness she felt, she settled the rest of her weight on the balls of her feet, proceeding to look about the room which they had traveled to.

‘Room’ was an understatement.

It was more like a cavern with a narrow platform on which they stood. The air was thin and hard to breathe, the stony walls radiated what felt like darkness. Darcy wondered if it was possible to feel darkness. If so, that was totally the feeling this cave was giving off. Fenrir and Frank were not happily bouncing around as they normally would, instead standing alert by their masters. Fenrir’s ears were perked and Frank was poised to attack, flicking his tongue at something behind Darcy.

She looked up at Loki whose brow was knitted in thought. He didn’t look scared, that would have been a comfort. He looked curious and Darcy knew the dangers of Loki and curiosity put together.

Cautiously, she turned in Loki’s arms to face the object that had captured her friends’ attention.

Her breath caught at the dark sight of a rectangular prism protruding from the end of their platform. It stood there, leering like an ancient ghost, a shadow of what could have been. An edifice of mystery, compelling to all who encountered it.
Its being emitted power, she could feel it stirring like a beast rousing itself from a thousand years of hibernation. Gently, she pushed herself from Loki’s hold, stepping forwards.

“Darcy...” he warned, but she ignored him. The pull of this stone was magnetic. It called to her, beckoning her forth as if needing her.

She shuffled towards it, stretching out her hand to feel the coarse indentations she could now make out on the surface of the stone.

The closer she got, the more powerfully a hollow force of dread washed through her. Her mind went blank and she felt herself become overwhelmed with a very dark reality.

The capital city of Asgard blossomed in her thoughts, the vastness of it blooming before her. In all its shining glory and awe inspiring power, it was radiant and familiar. She thought of Odin’s study and watched, in the depths of her mind, the city that had rooted itself to her heart wilt and set aflame. It fell for her, golden pillars tumbling over hoards of screaming people, the beautiful stars she loved so much were black and clouded over by dark smoke.

Her imaginary self ran out on the balcony, trying to get closer to the realm she worked so hard to protect. But now she was helpless. Her legs were too short to carry her any further and her muscles could have disappeared for all the good they were doing. She watched it burn, knowing in her mind that the people who had the power to stop the raging chaos did not know how. And in this crumbling realm, she felt very small.

Hope was on the horizon. A red glow appeared before her, shedding light onto the horror Asgard had become. This light offered her a solution. It was they key to fix the Realm Eternal.

It offered itself to Darcy and she considered reaching out with both hands and taking it.

But something made her stop.

Darcy knew the reality of it all: she was weak. She’d accepted that she was limited a long time ago. Yes, she was a mortal and yes, the realm was out of her control. But maybe that's how it should be. She couldn't control everything. She didn't need to.

Struck by her revelation, Darcy stepped away from the red, retreating from her nightmare.

Stumbling backwards, Darcy felt wiry arms wrap around her body, holding her close.

The mesmeric force had cleared from her mind, leaving her thoughts jumbled and abstract.

"Darcy," Loki said, calling her back to the real world; his voice was layered with concern and threat. He was on edge.

She gripped his hand, magical senses tender from the violent intrusion of whatever hid inside that stone. "Don't..." she fought for her words, "...don't touch it. It bites." Using her index finger, she traced little circles in the air beside her temple. "Trippy as hell."

"Has it hurt you?" he asked, patting her face and smoothing her hair back. His magic travelled through her, chasing away the last of the malign energy.

Breathing deeply, she relaxed into his chest. "No. I'm alright."

But Loki's focus wasn't on her anymore. His intelligent green eyes aimed their attention at the aggressive stone at the end of their platform. In an instant, he stepped around her, hypnotized as she
was by that unearthly power.

"Loki," she managed, reaching out and taking his hand, trying her best not to look down into the chasm below. She tugged on him, but he didn't budge, continuing to approach the very thing which they had sought out.

The closer Loki got the stone, the more alive it felt. Her senses flared as the energy coming off their malicious discovery darkened, getting excited. Fear clenched at Darcy’s heart and she jerked at Loki’s hand, urging him back. He did not just seem to be mesmerized as Darcy was, but challenged as well.

“Loki, come on. Spooky rock thing is uber creepy.” Darcy pleaded, her voice squeaking slightly.

He paused for a moment, his arm outstretched, fingers just brushing the stone.

“Please,” she tried again, wishing he’d step away.

“I need it, Darcy,” he said, so quietly she could barely hear him as he slipped his hand into where the stone separated. She felt him surge magic over the structure so that it split, the top elevating, releasing from its depth a deep red liquid.

Loki lifted his hand, delicate finger extended to the liquid in welcome.

“Loki!” Darcy shouted, jerking at his arm. For the second time that night, she was reminded of her weak human constitution and her inability to move him. “Please!”

At her voice, he froze, hesitating for a moment before dropping his hand down to his side. Very slowly, he turned towards her and she felt a tear slip out the corner of her eye. “Loki.”

His features relaxed and he finally responded to her pleas, wrapping the arm she had been pulling at around her waist and drawing her to him. “Darcy, I believe we have found one of Asgard’s greatest secrets.”

She was trembling, pressing herself closer to him. It took her but a few seconds to see that the markings on the side of the stone were of Dark Elfin origin. As impossible as it seemed, she knew what he was suggesting and didn’t disagree in the slightest. “The Aether. It’s an infinity stone.”

He glanced up at it. “It is powerful, but it cannot act alone.” He frowned. “It needs a host.”

Darcy’s heart was racing and her palms sweat in her fear. She was conscious enough of her body to know that these reactions were the stone’s work. Her senses were overflowing with the dark energy the liquid gave off, making her mind feel like it was being doused in empty, black space. It was horrifying.

Yet, at the same time, it was addicting.

They had found an infinity stone at last. She wanted to study it, learn from it, gain from it…

Darcy had priorities though. Safety was amongst them and the way Loki was looking at that stone was the opposite of safe.

“Lokes…”

He pursed his lips. “Liquid is not it’s original form.”

Darcy bit back her urge to scream and run, forcing herself to remain by Loki’s side. “How do you
know that?"

Tilting his head back and forth, he searched for an answer. “I am…communicating with it.”

“It can think?” she squeaked, dread pooling in her chest.

Loki rubbed her arm soothingly, his concentration mainly on the Aether. “Not exactly. I would call
it alive, but not intelligent exactly. It’s need for a host is almost…primal.”

“A ‘host’,” Darcy repeated, forcing herself to take calming breaths. “You’ve said that twice now,
what does it mean?”

Loki was silent for a moment, deciding how to explain this strange new artifact. “It cannot do
anything on its own. I assume, by how strongly it is fighting to come towards us, that it needs
someone to conduct its actions. For a being with potent magical prowess, the Aether could act as
an added power source and the two could function in a symbiotic relationship. For a being of feeble
magical constitution, it would act as a parasite.”

Darcy was about three seconds from walking up to the damn thing and pushing it into the
seemingly endless pit below. “Loki, let’s go. We can come back. Put it away now.”

He nodded, his face screwing up as he ‘communicated’ with the Aether. The red liquid thrashed in
midair, edging closer to them. He made a sound of frustration, holding up his hands. “It does not
want to go back.”

“No duh!” Darcy agreed, her voice shaky.

Hands held out before him, Loki seemed to push back. “Darcy, I’m terribly sorry.”

She swallowed dryly, her face twitching as Loki’s muscles tensed. She remained by his side,
refusing to move. “Why are you sorry? What did you do? God dammit, Loki!”

He jerked his head, grunting in effort as the Aether rose into the air, spreading out, preparing to
attack it’s prey. “I’m going to have to take it. At least for a moment.”

Darcy’s eyes went wide and she instinctively stepped in front of him. “Um, how about, ‘no’. That
stuff has ‘evil’ written all over it. Need I remind you of the Dark Elves? They were not very nice
people! They liked to test poisons on their prisoners and curse books to make people’s insides burn
if they couldn’t understand what the text said.”

His lips pulled back over his teeth, emerald eyes near glowing with intensity. “I am aware. I am
now facing the consequences of my naivety.” A few locks of black hair fell into his face and
Darcy’s blood started to boil. Loki never had this much trouble with magic before and now she was
entirely helpless in assisting him.

"Find another way," Darcy commanded. Maybe it was intuition, maybe she was just scared, but
Darcy had a feeling that taking the Aether out of it's pretty container was a bad idea. Someone
created a pocket in space to hide the dumb thing. She wasn't going to let Loki be the idiot who took
it out.

He made a noise that sounded almost like a growl. “Darcy, find a portal. Find a way out.”

Darcy nodded, frantically trying to detect something that wasn’t freaky Dark Elf fluid. Her brain
felt clogged, like she was underwater and all her senses were overtaken by one singular substance.
She fought her way to the surface, looking around Loki’s shoulder to Frank and Fenrir who were growling/hissing at the Aether. “Guys, find a portal!”

They whined and began shuffling about. Darcy looked up at the ceiling which is where they came from Asgard. Her throat felt thick as she thought about the placement of the realms. If this place truly was centered between Asgard and Svartalfheim, there was only one way to go.

“Loki, we have to jump again,” she said through a thick throat, looking into his face with raw, unadulterated seriousness. “There’s too much power coming off that thing for me to be sure. If we’re wrong, we’ll be jumping straight into our graves. Our bodies will make the bottom of this pit look like the set of a Quentin Tarantino film.”

Loki shifted his gaze to stare into her eyes, his features relaxing as it dawned on him the profundity of their hopeless state. They had a chance, and as small as it may be, something told her that chancing death was preferable to setting the Aether on the universe. Acceptance passed between them, shrouding their apprehensions in a cloak of noble sacrifice. Darcy wasn't sure why exactly, but she knew, in the very depths of her soul, that if she was going to die with anyone, she would want them to be Loki. She took in his face, the curve of his mouth and the line of his nose, breathing in his scent and finding peace in his eyes.

“I love you, Loki,” she said as he dropped one of his hands.

“As I love you, Darcy,” he returned, linking their pinkies in a silent promise.

As far as last words went, they could have done worse.

With a bare hint of a smile, he let his other arm down fall to his side and together, closely followed by Frank and Fenrir, they jumped.

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Lost in the sensation of falling, Loki hardly noticed when his body did not suddenly become a red spot on a bit of stone.

When the air around them changed to a stale musk and his back landed with a sharp thud against the ground, he very nearly believed that death was not quite as painful as he imagined it would be.

Then he felt, clasped tightly in his palm, Darcy’s hand. He would know Darcy’s hands from anywhere.

Before he could come to the conclusion that he was, as a matter of fact, not dead, a wet tongue lapped at his cheek, waking him from his disorientation. Instantly, his eyes shot open to the sight of a green sky filled with ashen clouds.

Darcy lay on the ground beside him, groaning as Jörmungandr licked her nose. “Frank, I swear to God, I’m dead now. Just let me sleep while I’m dead.”

Loki couldn’t help but roll his eyes, “Darcy, we are alive.”

At this, her eyes fluttered open and her mouth gaped at the gloomy area around them. The ground was black sand, littered with piles of grey rock and what looked like disassembled and ancient parts to ships fallen years before even he was born. Darcy’s surprise quickly turned to glee as she leapt up, throwing her hands in the air and doing a rather odd dance.

“We’re alive!” she cheered, throwing her hands in the air and joining Fenrir and Jormungandr in a
celebratory run around a rock. “I’m not going to die a virgin!” she shouted, laughing breathlessly, sprinting up to him and throwing herself into his arms.

Loki caught her easily, a broad smile plastered across his face and a laugh racking his body with enthusiasm. “Out of all the things to be worried about—“

“Sh!” Darcy covered his mouth with her hand, “Don’t ruin it.”

He gave a muffled chuckle, unable to wipe the grin from his face as he set her down. She sighed happily, wrapping her arms around his neck and closing her eyes in contentment.

Then she stopped.

Loki watched, confused, as her face contorted from irrefutable delight to boiling rage. Before he knew it, she was pushing at his chest and cursing him for all that he was. “Loki! What the hell?! Are you completely out of your mind?! When did you go banana balls? Huh? Was it today after you jumped out of a longship? Or maybe when you decided it would be a good idea to let a GIANT PARASITICAL ENTITY ALMOST TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE!”

Loki rubbed his jaw in thought, mind flitting back to the Aether.

What a discovery.

No doubt it was an infinity stone. Loki had not dreamed of an artifact that could be so powerful. It was stunning. He had been lured to it as any common fool.

He grimaced in thought. “I am sorry, Darcy,” he apologized, settling his hands on her shoulders and her hard expression melted, her blue eyes a bit watery.

She sniffed, her bottom lip poking out in a pout. “Explain it to me. I obviously didn’t get as much from it as you did.”

Loki brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, running his thumb under her eye where a tear had spilled out. “I do not believe that is entirely true.”

She swallowed hard, eyes wide with curiosity. “Why?”

“Because,” he began, searching for a way to explain and evaluate this near spiritual journey he’d been on. “You experienced the same pull I did, yet you reacted differently.”

Darcy blinked up at him. “Okay. You got me. I’m lost.”

He sighed, pulling away from her so that he could pace. “Originally, I thought that the Aether was simply a source of power. In all of the history books, in all of the Asgardian stories and legends, the Aether was used by the Dark Elf, Malekith the Accursed, to overthrow Bor’s armies and set the Nine Realms into darkness. They do not specify on what that meant or how Malekith would have used the Aether.”

Darcy nodded, biting the inside of her cheek. “I’ve read the stories.”

Loki kneaded his brow. “Yes, well, the stories are wrong and terribly vague in part. The Aether is a great deal more dangerous than they let on. I told you before that it was parasitical in that it would find a host that could guide it to its intended purpose, or use it for their own. I am unsure as I did not take the Aether.
“Still,” he licked his lips, remembering the pull of the stone and his fight to keep his wits about him. “it is made to infect. It is like a creature that wishes to make you ill.”

Darcy sat down in the sand, Fenrir laying across her lap. “How do you mean?”

He held his chin, staring down at her for a moment. “When you first moved towards the Aether, what compelled you to do so?”

“What?” Darcy asked dumbly, taken aback by his sudden question.

Kneeling before her, Loki leveled his gaze with hers, searching for the truth. “You began walking towards the stone before I. But unlike me, you pulled away. The design of the Aether, as I now understand it, is to bait ‘hosts’ with truth.” He smoothed a hand over Fenrir’s fur. “It showed me the reality of the universe and how very little difference we all make. I wanted to know more. Had I let it take me, I would have needed to exercise a certain amount of control, but even so, I would not be able to maintain full control over the power it provided for at least another four years. By then, my magic will have developed enough for me to handle it properly and without error.”

Darcy was soaking in every word, but she also seemed…ashamed. Her eyes were downcast, and her fingers knotted in Fenrir’s fur. “Darcy?” he asked, scooting closer and cupping her face in his hands. “Darcy, what is wrong?”

She shook her head, lips twisting into a bitter frown. “I just realized…”

Loki felt her cheeks warm in his hands and he wished desperately that she would just tell him what she saw. “Darcy, please…”

Pulling away from his hold, she let her face fall into her hands “I saw Asgard and I guess…” she let a deep breath out through puffed cheeks. Hesitantly, she peeked up at him. “Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Am I weak to you?” she asked and he could tell that this inquiry played into what she saw. He saw the shallow depth of the universe, which made him feel empty somehow. The Aether’s reality was that the universe was small and simple when it was Loki’s life, his calling, to find the complicated nuances of what made up existence.

And what was worse, is that in this small little universe, he hardly had control over any of it. He saw what the control could be like through the Aether. The endless power and unyielding strength. He didn’t want the Aether. He didn’t even want the power that came with the Aether, he simply wanted himself to be enough.

It was the reality of his insignificance, as he had been insignificant his entire life. He believed that because of his thoughts and understanding of the worlds around him, he might have some innate power that no one else had. But in all his studies, he was still inadequate, for he could control so little in this miniscule universe.

In his vision, he was omniscient. The known universe was balanced on the tip of his smallest finger. And while it was tiny and Loki could see all that transpired inside, he could do naught but watch. No matter the size of the universe he had so little influence over it.

Darcy, obviously, had seen a different reality.

He squinted at her, wondering if she was making a jest. Yet, sincerity burned in her clear blue eyes and he answered her immediately. “Darcy, of course you are not weak. I consider you one of the
strongest people I know.”

She sadly shook her head. “I guess that was the wrong question.” Sighing, she drew a circle in the sand with her finger. “You saw the size of the universe, I saw the size of myself. And I saw that I am, in truth, powerless, dependent, and extremely small…”

She took her lip between her teeth for a moment. “Compared to you, I can’t do anything.”

Loki felt his heart drop and he shook his head so hard that he felt his brain rattle. “Darcy, please. Do not lie, it is unbecoming of your character.”

She silenced him with the hard line of her sight. “Loki, I know what I saw and I’m honest enough to admit that it’s true. It’s a simple fact that I am a mortal. I am advisor to a prince who has significantly more power than me. Everyday I work with people who make decisions I can only hope to influence. I am teased by control that is just outside my reach.

“I have my merits, but I’m helpless in the grand scheme of things. I can try to prevent the collapse of Asgard if or when Thor becomes king, but I won’t be able to save it once it starts going downhill.” She met his eyes, her glare intense. “If your life is being threatened by some floating mass of mystery-goo, I can’t pull you away no matter how hard I try.”

Loki didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t lie to Darcy. What she said, all of it, was true. He wished it were not, but even he had proved her point. Though he was immersed in the reality of the Aether, he had felt her trying to tug him away, and he didn’t respond.

Finally, after what could have been hours of focusing on one another, thinking back on the bitter truth of reality, Loki broke the silence. “I am sorry, Darcy.”

She took his hands, bringing them to her lips and kissing his palm. “Don’t be. It is what it is.”

Loki had the urge to disagree as he thought of Idun and her golden apples. If it was power Darcy desired, he could make it happen.

Loki would treasure that moment for the rest of his life, however short it may be at the rate he was going.

It was a moment where he and Darcy had shared with each other, not only a near-death experience, but also their weaknesses. The inescapable reality of their lives. They shared each other’s vulnerability.

When Darcy’s cheek pressed against his hand, he knew for sure that she was an individual who knew as much about himself as he did, perhaps even more.

The idea should have terrified him, but it did not. He trusted Darcy, wholly and completely. If there was anyone he felt comfortable with knowing him so, it was her.

She yawned, the stale wind of Svartalfheim gently blowing her mussed hair. “There is something to learn from all this.”

“Is there?” Loki asked, taking an opportunity to examine this new realm. Admittedly, it was quite ugly.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, lifting her arms above her head to stretch her muscles. “The Aether shows possible hosts a reality that scares them. For us, that’s lack of control. Maybe it varies depending on the person. But for us, it showed that we were powerless in some way or another,” she
grumbled.

“It tempted us, because it posed itself as a solution to our incapability. I suspect -” Loki paused to lick his lips which were a little dry. He wondered idly when the last time he ate or drank anything was. “- for a price. It would give us the supposed power we wanted in exchange for its needs.”

“And if historical texts and story books are anything to go by,” Darcy continued, “It wants to plunge the Nine Realms into eternal darkness.” She tapped her chin. “Or do you just think that’s a Dark Elf thing?”

Loki ran a hand through his hair. “I am unsure.”

They pondered the potential needs of the Aether for while before their musings were cut short by Fenrir and Jörmungandr making sounds at each other.

Darcy and Loki turned their attention to their pets who were positioned much like their masters. They seemed to be amidst a deep conversation. Fenrir’s blue eyes bore into Jörmungandr’s black ones and he quickly shook his head back and forth in a very clear ‘no’ signal.

Darcy smiled tiredly, “What do you think their realities were?”

Loki considered that a second before returning Darcy’s smile. “Perhaps they have finally discovered that they are not the creatures they think they are. Perhaps Fenrir saw that he was a dog, while Jormungandr saw that he was a serpent.”

The two animals sniffed each other, walking circles around one another and vehemently shaking their heads. Darcy laughed. “If they did, they’re deep in denial.”

Loki chuckled along with her, some of the tension falling away from their shoulders. At last he stood up, offering Darcy his hand. “Come. Let us find a portal off of Svartalfheim. It should not take long.”

Darcy groaned loudly, stumbling to her feet. “Dude, a portal could take us anywhere. I just wanna go home and lay in bed and not write that essay.”

Taking her hand, he sighed. “Darcy, you had weeks to do that essay.”

“I’m a busy lady,” she defended. “Speaking of busy, today’s been a long day and my puny mortal legs are tired. You should carry me.”

When he didn’t answer, she slumped against his side, ceasing their ability to walk. “Please, Loki. I can’t stand it,” she moaned, giggling a bit. “Get it? I can’t ‘stand”? Eh?”

Loki made a face. “I will carry you, but your jests are truly horrifying.” He bent at the knees to get an arm under her legs and around her back. “And that is coming from the person who nearly accepted an infinity stone.”

“You’re just jealous,” Darcy teased, resting her head in the cook of his neck as he walked across the sterile land. “Loki, there are seriously no portals here.”

He scowled. “I am aware. Perhaps—“

“Hel!” Darcy gasped excitedly, wiggling from his arms, her skirts catching on the straps of his armor.
His confusion dissipated at the sight of his horse standing a short distance away. Darcy, Jörmungandr, and Fenrir all ran towards her excitedly and Loki closely following, thanking the gods for his precious horse.

“Hel,” he greeted her warmly, nuzzling the bony side of her face. She nudged him after a few seconds, telling him to get on already. She could tell how drained he and Darcy were.

He sat astride her, positioning himself behind Darcy who had hold of Hel’s reigns. “Hel, you’re actually my favorite. Don’t tell Frank and Fenrir I told you.”

Loki chuckled, wrapping his arms around her as Hel took off across the black sand, charging into the shadows.

He wished he had not been so worn out when traveling with Hel in such a way. He had seen her disappear into the shadows numerous times, but had never dreamed that he could ever go with her.

Granted, traveling through what felt like dark nothingness was not very pleasant. It was like the world around him had been swallowed up and left him with only his conscience for company. Even Darcy, who he held in front of him, felt distant.

Needless to say, when the darkness melted away into the field by the passage to Darcy’s room, he was quite happy.

He leapt off his horse friend, helping Darcy down. Not that she needed his help, he just wanted to be sure. Jörmungandr and Fenrir made noises at Hel, circling her legs while she neighed almost accusingly at them.

“Frank, Fenrir, leave Hel be,” Darcy chided, bidding their horse farewell and approaching the portal. Loki followed her into the cave, which was still roomy with the four of them inside, casting them to Midgard.

Darcy was the first from under her bed, earnestly pacing her room, still in her formal dress and shoes. “Loki, I need paper and a pen. My only option is to write some bull and hope for a C. What time is it?”

Loki glanced at the clock on her bedside table. “Four in the morning.”

“Dammit!” Darcy cursed under her breath, fishing a pencil from her backpack along with a notebook. She sat on the side of her bed and furiously began writing a thesis.

Loki acknowledged the bags under her eyes and the state of her hair. She would be asleep in minutes, no matter if she wanted to or not. Clicking his tongue in disapproval, he got to his knees and undid the buckles of her boots and removing her Asgardian stockings that ended just below her knees. Magically he changed into his preferred sleepwear and climbed into bed, watching as Darcy slowly lost consciousness. Slumped against the headboard, her lips parted and she snored softly.

With a tender smile, he pulled her down so she was under the covers and her head rested on a pillow. And, because he was feeling merciful, he finished her essay for her before switching off the light and nodding off to the smell of Darcy’s hair on the sheets.

A couple hours later, Darcy was stumbling around her room, getting ready for school when her mother called up the stairs that school had been cancelled due to a surplus of snow. Darcy took a second to thank Jesus Christ, falling back into bed and sleeping the day away. Loki could not think of any better way to recover from their first encounter with an infinity stone than laying in bed and pondering nothing but the backs of their eyelids.
Frigga was impressed if not perspicuously fearful of the dangers her son and his friend walked into so willingly.

She knew in her heart that this was, in part, her fault.

She encouraged them to be careful, while giving them the unsolved key to powers that could destroy the known universe as it was.

One could argue that she had no choice. The future could not have been plainer about Loki’s fate and the place Darcy would have in the events to come. They needed to be educated on the horrors they would face.

It went against everything she felt as a mother to let them risk their dear lives for such an invaluable thing like the universe. Loki, who was her son, first and foremost, had long since found his need for knowledge. It manifested along with his magic, making him insatiable when it came to educating himself.

Darcy Lewis, who Frigga had taken to considering a daughter in many different ways, had already accepted the burden of responsibility for a realm that was not even her own.

The Queen had not seen in her magical scrying pool what they experienced in the world between worlds, she only saw their leap of faith and the dark, liquid mass of the Aether following them down.

In spite of the heartbreaking horror that shook the Allmother to her very core, there were some things to be taken from all this.

Firstly that Loki had, if only for a short while, maintained control over an infinity stone without aid. He fought the power of an infinity stone and beat it. Frigga did not know whether to be proud or terrified at the power her son had managed to accumulate. She would never admit it to anyone, but Loki’s sorceries had surpassed her own in magnitude a year past.

However, she would not say he had overridden her skill. In this she remained superior.

The second thing that Frigga learned was unsurprising, yet clarifying nonetheless.

Darcy and Loki were hopelessly, blindly, utterly in love. They did not know it yet. Why her son, who was neither ignorant nor innocent, managed to overlook such an obvious fact was beyond her.

She smiled fondly; he was always so perceptive of everyone but himself.

And apparently Darcy as well.

Frigga wondered, as she reached for her pitcher of wine, how severely their upcoming relationship would affect the future.

She wasn’t able to focus on that thought for long as she was distracted by the daunting lack of wine in her glass.

Heaving a great sigh, the Queen stowed away her schemes for the night. She would return to them in the morning. For now, she would deal with significantly less challenging issues, such as discovering the whereabouts of her first son who had taken up the unfortunate habit of not returning to the palace until later in the morning.
Whatever she did, let it not be arguing with Odin. She had already spent her evening watching her ridiculous son and his equally ridiculous friend make dim-witted decisions. She did not have the patience for Odin as well.

Before leaving her chamber, Frigga ran her finger over the surface of her scrying pool, catching a faint glimpse of her sons in the water. Both grown with long hair, aged well and handsome as ever they were, their grins carefree and wholesome.

This small potentiality warmed her very soul; giving her hope that no matter how desperate and bleak the present may seem, it would get better.

Chapter End Notes

I was so excited to put this chapter up, you have no idea. I was, like, burning in my skin. That's how excited I was.

Alright! A couple notes about some things!
Firstly, I am including the infinity stones in this fic, but I'm going to write them with a bit more character than in the movies. I'm slowly going to be introducing more, but I'm not sure we'll end up seeing all seven of them in this fic.

Secondly, I want to just explain my thinking on Darcy and Loki's realities. Darcy's fear is a bit more understandable. At the very least, it's more straightforward. In reality, she is small and she doesn't have a lot of power compared to how big the world around her is. For her, the universe is a really big thing to take care of and she has very little control over it.
I used Asgard in her vision as a representation, more or less, of what her reality is. Of course her fears and such apply to her position on Asgard, but it isn't limited to Asgard.

Loki's reality is a bit more complex.
So, sometimes, when students are in a particularly competitive working environment, they will get stressed out. Not because the work is hard, but rather that they aren't understanding the work when they that they should because the people around them (seemingly) understand it.
This is sort of where I'm going with Loki. He doesn't have any competition but
himself. The Aether showed him how small the world is and plucked the heart of his frustration in saying "look at this tiny little thing that you can't even understand. you're insignificant as ever you were."

Darcy could sort of accept, to some extent that she wasn't always going to be in control. Loki couldn't really decide that by himself.

Boom. Character flaws.

A bit of a warning, not quite a disclaimer, Darcy will start swearing a bit because...teenagers swear I guess. So, yeah, there's that.

Thank you everyone for being so patient with this chapter, I know that it took me forever to churn out! Thank you thank you thank you to all of you for being such wonderful humans (or aliens, I don't judge). You're great, I love you, and...yeah. :)
Darcy has feelings. Loki has feelings. Sif has feelings. Sigyn has feelings. Tyr has feelings. Thor almost has feelings. Frank has steak.

Darcy rubbed sleep out of her eyes, aware of the heavy weight of someone’s head on her chest. There was a little wet spot of drool on her collarbone and she felt smothered.

“Grace,” Darcy grunted, trying to push off her friend. “Get your face out of my boobs.”

Grace didn’t even budge, emitting a loud snore in response.

Darcy persevered for a good moment, wiggling around a bit and attempting to shove herself away, but she gave up after a while, instead choosing to stare at the ceiling and wait for Grace to turn in her sleep.

Grace had called her up on a Wednesday night, claiming that she was bored, alone, and entirely disillusioned from the idea that homework could do anyone any good and she demanded that Darcy spend the night at her house while her mom was out of town.

Originally, Darcy had no intentions of staying up late with Grace on a school night. She and Loki were going to magically break into college libraries and borrow books. For science.

Their assessment of the Aether had been going horribly. Loki had brought up several times that the Aether’s original form had not been liquid. This was significant somehow, but they weren’t sure why.

The stone had been like nothing they’d ever seen before. It was incomparable to any theoretical magical components, it contradicted Midgardian science and it left Darcy feeling like she had to re-learn everything she’d ever come to know about life.

It was a mess.

Not only that, but she’d also started having nightmares, dreams where the world was black and she was failing all of her classes while Loki died, her friends and family abandoned her, America voted
in another conservative president, and Asgard burned. They didn't start directly after their encounter with the Aether. Instead, they popped up sometime in the spring. Right before her final exams the Aether's reality because the stuff of her nightmares.

Her nights were miserable. They left her heart pounding, constricting with fear and throbbing with concern. She woke up in cold sweat, grappling at the sheets next to her for Loki. They always fell asleep beside each other, but Darcy moved around so much that Loki tended to migrate to the other side of the bed and huddle near the wall. Frank and Fenrir would snuggle up between them or at the foot of the bed.

She could not bring herself to tell him about her nightmares. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to tell him, she did. But, to some extent, her frightening dreams embarrassed her. Scary nighttime concoctions of the mind were a child’s fear and Darcy was fifteen now. Her childish ardency during stolen moments with Loki and secret jokes with Sif and Sigyn were incomparable to her current pain.

Her passions were not weaknesses; rather it was her fears that made her so. The powerless feeling she got from being around the Aether refused to fade and though Loki found no residual magic from the stone on either of them, Darcy believed that the memory of it alone was enough to make her sick with self doubt.

When she inevitably awoke, panting and listening for the steady thrum of Loki’s heart, she would substitute her sleep for study by bringing books into bed with her, beginning homework due months away, writing letters to distant lands, assembling financial reports on the areas that Asgard’s treasurer didn’t have time to cover, memorizing the name of every convicted Asgardian criminal in the past year…she never ran out of things to do.

She liked being in Loki’s room on these nights. It was big and comfier than he liked to believe and it was easier to get up and walk around in without waking anyone.

Last night after Grace proposed their uncharacteristically risky sleepover, Loki made the executive decision to cancel their plans. He proclaimed that Darcy needed to spend time with her Midgardian friends with whom she could not tempt herself with the call of never-ending work.

Darcy didn’t want to. She had things to do and gods to watch over. But Loki had persisted, getting down on his knees before her, pleading that she do something to alleviate the workload she was putting herself through. That’s what got it for Darcy. Loki never begged anyone for anything. Though he was firstly her friend, he could not help but be a prince as well.

He had a tendency to think that he could have something simply because he wanted it or that he could make anything happen if only he willed it to be so. It wasn’t a violent or troublesome propensity, but rather a funny quirk to his attitude. He was proud and Darcy thought he was cute.

His kneeling before her, the ultimate sign of Asgardian submission and respect, touched her so profoundly that she didn’t dare refuse him. She wondered for a moment what had come over Loki that he would resolve his worries for her, not by insisting she that remain by him, but rather by sending her away.

Darcy went to Grace’s house with full intentions of studying for their literature exam (as literature was the only class Grace and Darcy shared) but as soon as she got inside, Grace ripped the books from her hands, dragged her up the stairs, and declared a full on sleepover.

To be honest with herself, Darcy was a tiny bit jealous of Grace. She’d gone into high school looking cute and sporty and now, a little over a year later, she had evolved into a gorgeously
athletic hippie while Darcy had gone from quirky and short, to quirky and short with tits the size of Jesus.

Grace twisted her hair into dreadlocks, wore Birkenstocks with her sweatpants, grew marijuana in a rainbow painted pot in her window (because grow boxes were mainstream) and practiced raw veganism. She went on pride marches, ran 5ks for cancer donations, rode her bike to school, and only used handmade soap.

Why couldn’t Darcy do all that?

Oh, right. She was a politician. On another realm. Damn.

Grace’s mother was a well renowned lawyer and a couple nights ago one of her client’s had called in from California which meant Grace was home alone for the week with her brother, who was back from college for the summer.

So, instead of inviting Ashley and her cheerleading friends, Grace had invited her.

Darcy was friends with Ashley and the, quote-unquote, ‘popular kids’, but she didn’t get a whole lot of time to hang out with them. They called her by her last name and invited her out with them some nights. She declined. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to, she just didn’t have time.

She got the feeling that Grace didn’t like that group very much anyways. She hated how they drank near the river and left crushed beer cans on the shore and frothed at the mouth when they crumpled up paper when they’d only used one side. If Grace was ever around when one of them did something stupid like throw away a plastic bottle, she would call them all dirty blasphemers then properly recycle the plastic.

Even though Darcy hated Grace’s diet of vegetables, nuts and fruit, she was secretly pleased with the route she’d taken. Grace was relaxed, funny, and she had a real passion for trying to make the world a better place to live.

She hoped that one day Grace Wilson would change the world.

But, at the moment, she hoped Grace Wilson would move her head.

“Grace,” Darcy tried again, arching her back. “My mammary glands are asleep. I’m not even sure that’s supposed to happen.”

Nothing.

Grumbling to herself, Darcy reached her hand out to Grace’s side table where her phone and glasses sat next to an ashtray.

So, they smoked a bit of pot last night. Grace said she was too stressed and apparently the best way to relieve stress in Grace’s book was to smoke Mary Jane, listen to Bob Marley and The Beatles, and watch The Princess Bride. Darcy had to say, she hadn’t felt so calm in a long while.

Admittedly, Darcy had gotten high with Grace before on a few occasions. But they never took any of it out of Grace’s house and they never had enough to get in trouble with the law. Grace kept her tiny little weed trimmed down enough that it only grew enough for a few joints a season and no one knew about its product but Darcy.

She’d gotten the seeds from some students in Boston when she went to go visit her brother and henceforth the plant was grown.
Mrs. Wilson was a lawyer, and Darcy was pretty sure she knew that Grace exercised the illegal right of recreational drug use, but chose to look the other way. Darcy’s parents didn’t know and they never would. Hopefully.

Tiredly, Darcy checked the time, surprised that it was already five thirty in the morning. Sure she’d gone to bed at twelve am, but Darcy couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten five dreamless hours of sleep. They had to leave for school at seven thirty which gave Darcy enough time to rifle through Grace’s closet for a clean t-shirt that smelled only vaguely of pot and to locate a set of clean socks. Happily, she scooted herself away from Grace who made sleepy attempts to keep hold of the breasts she’d been using as pillows. With an air of peace about her, Darcy stumbled from Grace’s room, making her way down the stairs to the kitchen where someone was stumbling about.

Peaking around the corner, she saw that it was Grace’s hot older brother, Sam. Darcy always did like Sam. Yeah, he was hotter than hellfire, but he was also really nice and whenever she slept over he made breakfast after his run.

Eyes still partially glued together with sleep, Darcy moved slowly to the breakfast bar and sat down on one of the stools. Sam was getting out the Bisquick and pulling a carton of eggs from a paper bag. “Morning Darcy,” he said, affectionately tousling her hair. “Mhm,” she sighed, watching him get out the frying pan and a pack of bacon from his bag. He always woke up early to go for a run. Dressed in neon colors and tightly laced sneakers, Sam was the only one of the Wilsons known to wake up before noon given the option.

He was in college, finishing up his bachelor’s degree in psychology, but Grace had told her in a hushed whisper the night before, that prior to her mother’s departure, she and Sam had a fallout because he wanted to join the army.

Mr. Wilson had died when Grace was four. He had been a preacher, against violence of all sorts, and he died trying to settle a fight between a few young men. Darcy could see why Mrs. Wilson would be upset by her son’s decision, but the more she thought about it, the more Sam struck her as a soldier. He was loyal and, like Grace, wanted to make the world a better place to live.

He laughed in a way that made Darcy want to laugh. Darcy spent a lot of time with gods. She knew what beautiful people looked like and Sam Wilson was, in her opinion, a very beautiful person. “It smells like pot in here.”

Darcy sat up to make a horrible attempt at winking. “Mhm.” Sam shook his head disapprovingly, his cheekbones were almost as fantastic as Loki’s. But Darcy hadn’t really met anyone with better bone structure than Loki. Maybe if she met Angelina Jolie…

“I can’t believe you guys are doing that as sophomores. I mean,” he turned on the stove and began situating bacon strips in a pan, “when I was in high school, I at least waited till senior year to start the partying.”

Darcy snorted. “Sam, think about what you just said. Grace and I? Party animals? You’re talking about a girl who’s going to walk down the stairs and scream about how you’re eating pigs that have been pumped full of chemicals. And those eggs had better be free range.”
He pointed his spatula at her. “Hey now, something has to get the weed smell out of this house and Grace’s organic incense isn’t going to cut it.”

Darcy chuckled groggily, rubbing her eyes and watching him stir pancake batter longingly. If she ever had to be subjected to domestic life, she wanted a partner who would cook for her. And she wanted them to have Sam Wilson’s butt.

Darcy quickly dismissed the thought of being romantically involved with anyone. Being a teenager was tedious in regards to romance.

On one hand, she craved it. She wanted someone to woo her and love her unconditionally, taking her through a saga of pained love and endless kisses. She imagined sometimes, a Mr. Darcy-like figure, a lover with traits of a Byronic hero, tormented by their own miseries who favored her over the humdrum of life as it was.

Reality was never far behind, reminding her that no such human existed and that she was being a silly teenage girl.

Instead of love proclamations, she was met with the letters of an annoying amount of suitors.

As Advisor to Prince Loki and an active member in the Asgardian court, Darcy was prime courting material. By all her Asgardian standards, she was rich. Her Asgardian account was brimming with gold and Darcy was loaded from her salary received as an advisor. Being that she was wealthy and eligible, with no titles but her worthy position as Advisor, she was constantly pursued by young lords from all around the world.

They knew of her only by her title and visited the palace in search of a dance. Darcy had very few to give lest they be for conversing about professional matters.

The truth was, Darcy couldn’t bring herself to like any of them. She knew that in the end, she couldn’t be with them. Any relationship they had would be a lie and keeping up the pretense of her Asgardian nativity would weigh upon her conscience too heavily for anyone’s good. No matter how many golden apples she ate and no matter how much effort she put into being Loki’s advisor, she was not an Asgardian.

And she didn’t think that was a bad thing either.

Bringing her attention back to Sam, Darcy watched, beguiled, as his finely shaped arms set to work on making breakfast.

“So, how’s school?” he asked and Darcy told him it was fine. They chatted for a while. He teased about how she was stressing herself out over nothing when it came to the history exam and she retaliated by telling him at he wasn’t as good at running as he thought he was.

The sun was starting to come up as Sam served her a piping-hot stack of pancakes topped with whipped cream and drowning in maple syrup with a side of eggs and bacon accompanied by a steaming mug of coffee. Darcy moaned in ecstasy at her first forkful of egg. Neither of her parents were great cooks, but all of the Wilsons were. Sam made breakfast and baked like nobody's business, Mrs. Wilson made everything from fried chicken to fondue, and Grace managed to make her raw vegan meals taste delicious.

Sam served himself, leaning on the counter as he ate. “So,” he began again after a few bites of pancake. “Grace tells me you tutored the senior class president in chemistry last year.”

Darcy shrugged modestly, not making eye contact as she broke her bacon into bits to eat with her
eggs. It was true. Her lab partner, Susan Storm, otherwise known as the cool bookstore clerk, had been one letter grade away from failing chemistry and Darcy, being the sympathetic person that she was, offered to tutor her.

Ultimately, Darcy hated herself for adding another task to her endless list of responsibilities. But she was also glad that she could help Susan. She was hardworking and didn’t discriminate against Darcy for being a ninth grader in a twelfth grade class. In the end, Susan Storm passed her exams with flying colors and Darcy got good discounts on books for the entire summer.

“I guess,” she said around a mouthful of pancakes.

She didn’t want to come off as humble because she was, in truth, very proud of herself for being able to pick up information so quickly. But, at the same time, she didn’t ever believe that she deserved credit for all of her achievements. Loki was the one who taught her so much. He explained things like no one else could. Through his lips flowed clarity of the universe, a direct stream of understanding that swelled in her mind like a wave of solace.

So, in part, Darcy could never fully acclaim herself for knowing everything that she did when it came to the sciences unless it had something to do with politics. In that, she was completely free to be well esteemed for her understanding.

Sam seemed to get that she was uncomfortable with the subject matter and offered her a kind smile. “Hey, Darce, you’re a smart girl. It’s okay to say so.” He took a sip of his orange juice, smiling around the rim. “But what I really want to know is why you and Grace are sleeping over on a school night! I thought you would keep her out of trouble, not encourage her.”

Darcy pretended to look offended, placing a fist over her heart, perhaps by habit as it was an Asgardian trait to do so. “Sam, I’m hurt. Obviously, I am, like, the most negative influence of the last…billion years or something. Really. Grace made the best choice by becoming friends with me. I’m so bad that I’m great.”

He laughed, looking like he was going to say something before an angry flurry of steps echoed through the house as Grace rushed down the stairs.

She appeared before them, fully dressed and her hair tied back with a green strip of cloth that Loki would probably steal if he ever saw it. Her face was contorted with nothing short of vile rage.

“Is that bacon?”

After Darcy and Sam received the full lecture on why it was bad to support factory farms by purchasing their steroid infused products, the two girls headed for school. Grace lived four miles away which she claimed was the perfect distance for walking.

It was easy for Grace to say because she had long legs. She strode like a bohemian model on the leaf-littered sidewalk, showcasing the latest fall fashions while Darcy trailed closely behind like the dwarven lackey hired to sweep up the fairy dust that sprinkled from her friend’s skin while she walked.

Before first hour, Darcy called her mom to let her know that she and Grace were fully prepared for the day of school and that she hadn’t spent the entire night goofing off.

It was almost a lie.

School was fine, or as fine as school could ever be, and when she arrived home that Thursday night after soccer practice, Loki was waiting on her bed with Fenrir splayed across his lap. They greeted
each other warmly, Loki kissing her forehead, as he had begun to do when seeing her, and squeezing her hand. Frank and Fenrir said hello as well, throwing themselves at her as if she’d been gone for decades. Together, they all departed for Asgard.

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Darcy was distracted as she stared into Queen Frigga’s scrying pool.

She was supposed to be learning about hypnotic rituals that Vanir tribal chiefs used on their warriors before battle to instill a sense of unity. But Darcy found that she could not focus on such a study. Her mind kept wandering off to Lord Bjarte and the proverbial war that was to come.

Her fifteenth birthday had just passed and the war with Vanaheim was soon approaching if Frigga’s words in Odin’s study those few years ago held any truth.

Darcy did not see how, or why, there would ever be a war on Vanaheim. It made no sense.

Lord Bjarte was not lacking power. This much was obvious. As High Lord of Nornheim, he had control over some of Asgard’s toughest warriors. And, as troublesome and as conservative as the Norns were, they were extremely wealthy.

Originally, Nornheim’s rebellion had made sense to Darcy. She had understood that the Norns wanted glory and power and they would rebel against the capital in order to gain use of the bifrost that would take them to Vanaheim. There, they would fight a tribe of Vanir for control over their land.

This is the part Darcy had not entirely understood until after she became Advisor.

Vanaheim was what Asgard called its ‘sister realm’. It was a realm all its own that was originally populated by its own means then colonized by Asgard. After a few hundred years, the natives rebelled and Asgard had a treaty made that declared Vanaheim’s independence, but with minimal control from Asgard. Odin had power there, as did the royal family. Any other Asgardian diplomat did not.

That treaty had stuck for millennia. It was such an old agreement that no one really knew the date it was decided.

But it had set a new culture on Vanaheim.

There was the realm’s capital and surrounding area which was reminiscent of Asgard. Aesir-style magic was practiced, there was an established government and there was a social hierarchy. None of it was as severe as Asgard, but the similarities existed nonetheless.

Then, outside of this Asgardian influence, was what the Vanir called ‘free land’ because it’s where all of the tribal people hung out.

As far as Darcy knew, the tribes flourished. There were thousands of them, some smaller than others, some had different beliefs, and others had similar ones. Some were nomadic, others had established territory. Sometimes the tribes fought with each other, but mostly they liked to keep the peace.

And, surprisingly, this system worked.

Living in a tribe was totally optional. No one was looked down on for their choice of lifestyle. Often times, injured warriors might decide to live out their days as a merchant, or a nobleman’s
daughter might chose to join the Meiri, an all women’s tribe that Darcy thought was kind of like the Amazons. They were a fierce bunch and it was a known fact that no one messed with the Meiri unless they wanted to die a very painful death.

This all led Darcy to the confused state she was currently in.

Asgard had no control over the tribes and gaining control over them would upset a harmony between the realms that has existed for thousands of years.

Lord Bjarte had so much power he could probably light up New York City if she plugged him into their power grid.

And as a High Lord, Bjarte didn’t have any say in what to do with the conquered land because it was on a different realm. Even if Asgard did go to war with the tribes and won, Odin would be the one to decide what was to be done with the land.

Therefore, Darcy was at a complete loss. Why was there going to be a war on Vanaheim if nothing was going to come of it?

And furthermore, why did Frigga know about it and wasn’t doing anything to prevent it?

Darcy frowned at the scrying pool, making a vague mental note about the tribal chiefs. Amongst the war-cultured tribes, the leaders would get together and cast a spell on their soldiers to inspire them. It was described by one of Frigga’s accomplices on Vanaheim, who Darcy preferred to think of as an undercover anthropologist, as a way of tying the tribe's energy together.

It was like heat in a beehive. The bee-like warriors would hum about, magical energies brushing against one another to create a warm strength amongst them. The combined force of their energy made them lethal and ruthless opponents. Victory in the form of blood dribbled off their blades, the taste sweeter than honey.

How was Darcy supposed to prevent a war when it was so insanely convoluted?

What was worse is that Frigga had something to do with it.

Frigga had tipped her off about the war which meant there was more to it that meets the eye.

If Frigga was involved, then Darcy was missing the key element to figuring out this wretched puzzle that the Queen and Lord Bjarte had set up especially for her.

“Darcy?” Frigga chided from her place by the window where she was sewing an elaborate tapestry, bringing Darcy from her troubled musings. “Are you well, Darling?”

Darcy nodded, trying to ease the tension that had built in her brow. She had learned by now that questioning the Queen on her methods was hardly worth her time. Frigga made everything a lesson to be learned, even if she did not know the answers to her own questions. She claimed that most times, the best things learned are mysteries even to one’s self. Darcy tried not to dwell too hard on the complexity of that idea.

“I’m fine, just thinking.”

The Queen gave her a knowing look, holding out her hand. “Sit with me for a moment.”

Smiling, Darcy hurried to the window seat and plopped down beside the Queen. Frigga, while confusing and a teacher of difficult lessons, was almost like a second mom to Darcy. Not that
Frigga could ever replace Darcy’s own mother, not in a million years.

Frigga was just a particularly nurturing person and her affection towards Darcy came off in a very maternalistic way.

The Queen cupped Darcy’s cheek, running her thumb over the dark circles under her eyes. She didn’t say anything about it, but Loki and his mother shared the same worried expression that neither, no matter how hard they tried, could disguise.

The two of them shared a lot of traits actually. When they were thinking really hard, they played with their palms. They even had similar magic styles, but Darcy figured that was because Frigga was Loki’s instructor.

Despite the fact Loki looked nothing like either of his parents, Darcy would never argue that he wasn’t Frigga’s son.

“Hypnotic practices are fascinating, though perhaps today is not the day to appreciate them,” Frigga said thoughtfully, turning her attention out the window.

Darcy shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

The Allmother smiled, “Do not be. There are plenty of other things to be thinking about.”

The two were silent for a long moment as Frank lazily slid onto Darcy’s lap. Really, he was too big to sit on her lap, so was Fenrir, but Darcy didn’t tell them that. He rolled onto his back, the pale scales of his underside glinting up at her. The corners of her mouth tugged up as she rubbed his belly.

“Darcy, how do you feel about High Lord Tyr?” Frigga asked curiously, watched Frank make sounds of contentment, tongue lolling out in happiness.

Darcy thought back on her meeting with him and the Thryheim representatives, along with their encounter in the hall as well as several other messages they had exchanged. In the past year, whenever Darcy communicated with Thryheim, Tyr was always involved and his letters were all quite informal, always asking how she was and how her prince was faring. “He seems capable, if not a bit young.”

The Queen smiled, the tiniest bit of melancholy in her eyes. “He is sweet. Become his friend and trust him wholeheartedly, he will respond in kind.”

This comforted Darcy. She wanted very much to trust Tyr and was pleased to know that she could. “I will.”

“Good. You and Loki were invited to stay with him in Thryheim for a time. How is your schedule for the next two days?” Frigga stated, her inquiry coming off as teasing.

Frigga, of all people, knew that Darcy was busy. Keeping most of her advisor work for the weekend was miserable, so that, on the worst occasions, she would have to travel out to some province in the evening and debate with Lords at three in the morning. And most Asgardians were not appreciative of being kept up past their godly bedtimes.

It was a Thursday night. Her double that Loki so frequently cast was probably asleep by now. Loki had gotten so good at it, that he could keep the double sustained from the energy around it. Even if he were to fall unconscious, the double would still maintain its place. Her conjured doppelganger didn’t do a lot; mainly it just sat in her room with a book in its lap, answering her mother or father
whenever they asked a question.

Darcy didn’t let Loki send her double to school or soccer practice. It was too risky and Darcy had made obligations, willingly or not, to go through with her circulars, both academic and extraneous, as well as her social life.

Darcy rubbed her temple. “I don’t really want to skip school tomorrow, but I can call in sick.”

Frigga looked to her seriously. “You know I would not ask you to do that unless it was vital that you visit him.”

“Is it?” she inquired, stunned. Frigga never asked her to skip school for Asgard. It just didn’t happen. Loki didn’t even ask her to skip school for Asgard.

He did however, ask her to skip school for him, but usually he was joking.

The Allmother nodded, a gleam of humor in her eye. “It is indeed. I believe that it may offer you some clarity to that which has distracted you from the fascinating detail of tribal magic.”

Darcy chuckled, standing up and stretching. “Alright, I’ll go ask Hilda to get some of my things together and then I’ll pry Loki away from whatever his brain’s working on.” She sighed, looking out the window. It was already dark, likely past ten. Thryheim was about six hours away from the palace by longship. Loki could teleport them, but she didn’t like him to. Many would consider it rude to just pop up magically at their front doors.

Frigga stood up as well, kissing Frank on the head before letting him slither down. “Tyr has assured me that since his invitation was on such short notice, he will provide all the attire you could possible wear. Also, Thryheim is quite cold this time of year and I’m afraid your wardrobe is inapt for the weather. As for Loki—” her speech was cut short by a light rap on the door. “Enter.”

Loki entered the room, a leather book-bag slung over his shoulder and Fenrir at his side.

Darcy knew there was a reason she loved the Queen.

“Mother,” Loki greeted Frigga, kissing her cheek. It was terrifying how much he’d grown. Of course he’d always been taller than her, but now it was like standing next to a sky scraper. He was nearing six feet tall and Darcy was a little embarrassed to say that she liked it.

His height, plus his face meant that Darcy was being left behind in the looks department. He’d somehow become prettier than a seventy-five percent discount on all her favorite shoe brands. It was kind of annoying, especially since he didn’t appreciate it. Darcy appreciated it, and it wasn’t even her face.

He offered her his hand, giving her the same worried look Frigga had. “Thryheim?”

She took his hand, tempted to lean into his side. “Yep. We’re special. We got exclusive invites from the High Lord himself.”

Smirking, he bid goodbye to his mother and led them from the room. “Actually, it was you who received the invitation. According to the script…” he conjured a thick piece of parchment and handed it to her. “…you are welcome to bring along ‘your prince’. It is an informal invitation.”

She took the paper, reading over Tyr’s familiarly angled script. “Most of his letters are. He talks about politics like we’re discussing the weather.”
Loki chuckled, tugging her closer to him.

Darcy wanted to ask him to do ‘the thing’ as she called it. In actuality, she knew that ‘the thing’ was a magical projection of himself onto her, as most magic entailed this. What made this projection different was that Loki didn't let the energy take form, it just went to her, overwhelming her magical senses until she and Loki were the only two souls in Yggdrasil.

It was like nothing she'd ever felt.

To feel someone so completely was addicting. She knew Loki better than anyone, but when he did this, she felt him in all that he was. Indeterminable feelings washed through her and that was how Darcy learned that one's emotions could not ever be summed up in mere words. Somethings had no explanation and she let this be one of them. They didn't make sense and she didn't have the ability to describe what they meant. The magic was Loki and that was all that mattered to her. He was her mystery and her clarity, her friend and her prince, the most annoying person she knew and also the most cuddly. She wouldn't have him any other way.

She decided that she would ask him later as he leaned over to smell her hair, humming appreciatively.

“What?” Darcy asked, glancing at him skeptically.

He grinned, smoothing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You went back to the floral soap rather than the strange Midgardian herb concoction. I much prefer the former.”

Darcy grimaced in memory of the sticky, homemade plant-soaps Grace gave her. She loved the environment, but Loki was right. Herbal shampoo didn’t settle well on her at all. Shaking her head in memory, she walked a little faster. “Come on, let’s get to Thryheim before the sun comes up. I need to gather some energy if I’m going to keep up with Tyr’s enthusiasm.”

With Frank and Fenrir tottering close behind, Loki and Darcy made their way to the young prince’s longship.

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Thor’s head throbbed with every step he took.

Ale was a wonderful thing, though he was learning that it lost its charm when morning came around.

He’d no sooner arrived back at the palace that morning, dressed in peasant attire and smelling of drink and woman, than some lowly servant brought him a message from his father, demanding that he go to his study immediately.

Thor debated whether or not to go clean up first. He was a mess and while he was far from clandestine about his nightly endeavors, he liked to keep up the pretense that he did not heinously disgrace his title every night. After all, he was young and it was almost expected that a prince take his liberties to explore his realm a bit before ruling it.

He was just outside his quarters, preparing to change his attire and bathe before seeing the Allfather when, in a flash of brilliant blue light, his mother appeared before him.

“Mother!” he gasped, stepping away from his door.

She smiled kindly at him and he went to kiss her cheek, then thought better of it considering where
his mouth had been the night prior. Frigga nodded as if to tell him that his choice was a wise one. “You cannot go to see your father looking like that and you do not have time to bathe lest you wish his rage to heighten.”

Thor crossed his arms, biting the inside of his cheek. Talking back to his mother was not a wise decision, as she tended to be right on all occasions. But her statement of his circumstances was infuriating. “Yes, Mother. If this is indeed my misfortune, what do you suggest I do? He wishes for me to be humiliated, does he not? Should I grant him his wish and appear to him as I am?”

She gave him a look so sharp, Thor’s aching head feared that he might’ve been cut. “I do not know what you are speaking of, my son. You are as fresh as ever you were.”

He opened his mouth to argue when a cool sensation tingled over his body and instantly he felt refreshed. His clothes were once again regal and his hair was clean and combed. Though he was now unsoiled and golden, his mind continued to throb painfully, he suspected, as a personal reminder of his stupidity from his mother.

“How,” she said, beginning to stride away. “Consider this an apology for not alerting you of this development. I am sorry to say that I was unaware of your father’s plans until just recently.”

Thor stood there dazed by the magic she used on him, far too distracted to comprehend her words until she was already gone. “What?” he muttered to himself, decidedly clueless as to what his mother had told him.

With heavy steps and deep breaths, he made his way to his father’s study. He must have drunk at least four barrels of mead with Volstagg before he’d even begun to feel the effects. Then there were the several casks of ale that he and Hogun bought. They drank all straight faced in a competition to see who could stomach the most without losing their evening meal.

Then, with a few bottles of wine, he and Fandrall retired to the brothel which had been marvelous. Such profession should be worthy of titles.

Thor didn’t spend all his time drinking. That night had been special. Thor won a fight in the street that some peasant had challenged him to. Winning had been easy, the glory of such feat, however, was much greater. The peasant who had challenged him was said to be the most brutal in that area of the city. Thor had taken him in no more than a few minutes.

Empowered by his victory, Thor bought everyone drinks.

The only way it would have been more fun was if Sif was there. She was great fun in merriment, always quick with a joke and willing to accept a challenge. She could almost handle her drink better than him.

But she had been with Sigyn.

Thor did not very much like Sigyn as he suspected Sigyn did not very much like him. They did not have a great deal in common. She was soft spoken and refined, reminding him all too strongly of the delicate flowers he’d grown up watching men pine over. She was kind and beautiful and Thor oft felt as though she was taking his place in Sif’s life.

He befriended Sif before Sigyn even knew she existed. Why was it that now, after all they had been through, Sif was so willing to trade his company for Sigyn’s?

He respected her decision, of course. Sif was his friend and he would stand by her no matter what, but he did miss her sometimes. He wondered if it was because she felt she had to choose between
him and Sigyn. Perhaps the next time he saw her, he would make it clear that Sigyn could come out with them if she so desired.

He approached the Allfather’s study, letting his thoughts drift away from Sigyn and onto the task at hand.

The guards opened the doors to him without hesitation and Thor stalked in, prepared for the worst of reprimands. He was well aware of the debauchery he was instilling upon his good name, but he was also painfully bored without such entertainment.

Odin sat at his desk, looking like the calm before the storm. His golden patch glimmered with cold menace that contrasted drastically with the sunny morning.

Thor swallowed hard, attempting to look resolute and bold. He was his own man, was he not? This meeting was only his father trying to show that he had power over him. When he took the throne, there would be none of this.

“Father,” he greeted, the pounding in his skull thudding in an especially painful way at the volume of his voice.

Odin stared at him for a long moment, his glare radiating disapproval. That glare alone could have vanquished the Frost Giants. “Sit down.”

Thor sat down.

Odin pulled onto his desk three scrolls and he set them in front of his so he could read all three. “Do you know what these are?”

Leaning over Odin’s desk, Thor struggled to read the scrolls. His vision was blurry and it hurt to focus. Nonetheless, he persevered and identified two of the documents as reports and the third as a collection of pamphlets from popular writers that kept up with the royals.

“They are…reports…?” Thor suggested softly, squinting to shield his eyes from the rising sun.

“About?” Odin probed further, a vein on his temple beginning to pulse with restrained anger.

The golden prince blinked, secretly fearing the inevitable yelling. “Me?”

The Allfather looked as though he could have razed an entire realm, yet he continued speaking in a subdued way that seeped malcontent. Suddenly, he brought his hand down upon the desk in a loud, near violent indication of the first scroll. “This one…” he started, waiting for Thor to uncoil from his fetal position. “…is a report of this past season’s royal spending.”

Thor got a sick feeling when he thought of all that he had bought in drinks the night before.

“This next one…” Odin slapped open the scroll with equal, if not more ferocity. Thor flinched, his ears ringing and his mind begging him for sleep and solitude…and perhaps a woman as well.

“…is a report of all the essential meetings you have neglected to attend as well as several theory papers as to what your actions imply politically, socially, and futuristically!” Odin ended his statement loudly enough for Thor’s vision to white out for a few seconds.

“Need I even say what the third one is?” Odin continued, standing up and taking the third scroll with him.
Thor opened his mouth to say something, but his father was already talking.

“It is a collection of writings published to the entirety of the realm about your evening, now daily, escapades! Each one depicting, in increasingly great detail, the essence of your endeavors while insulting the royal family and all that we do for our people!”

Thor didn’t know if he was flinching so forcefully because of the volume of his father’s words or the meaning of them.

“At first I believed,” Odin continued, minimally subdued, “that this could be useful and that you may learn something. I thought that you might take advantage of your newfound freedoms to discover ways to help your people. Instead, I have received endless documents of your exploits and the destruction you have caused within the city!”

Once he was sure that his brain was, in fact, not dripping out his ears, he addressed his father in a pained tone. “Is that all you called me for then? To tell me to stop? So be it, just…” he held out his hands, “be silent.”

In an instant, Gungnir was in his father’s hands and he glowered with rage. “Thor Odinson! If you truly claim to be a prince, then act as one! This realm demands more from you, as do I! You will rectify this behavior, for if I have to read through another one of these blasted reports from some hard-headed lady who believes she knows this realm better than it’s king, my wrath shall strike down upon this place and you had best be in my good graces if it does!”

Thor gave up on his attempt to preserve his mind. Let it melt. Perhaps if it was gone from him, it would not pain him so intensely. “Will you have me vow to be all that I can? Or would you take my word now as I am?”

The Allfather barked a humorless laugh, sneering out his window, a knowing look in his eye. “I acted similarly to you in my youth and there was but one thing that matured me to what I am today.”

“Becoming King?” Thor inquired daringly.

At this, Odin turned to him, his gaze solid and unyielding. “A woman.”

Thor simply stared at his father for a long moment before his words sunk in. So struck with shock, he nearly fell from his chair, gasping for clarification. “You wish me to be wed?”

His own voice hurt made his head throb, but he could not be bothered to care when the Allfather’s reply arrived. “Yes. Having duty towards your family will drive you from this mess of a life you’ve lived.”

Thor was still caught up on the part where he was to be married. His days as a bachelor would be over before they had truly begun. “You wish that I find a bride?”

Odin chuckled, returning to his chair and shaking his head. “Of course not.”

Thor breathed a sigh of relief.

“I have already chosen for you.”

The breath got caught in his throat and he coughed out his next question. “Who?”

The answer he received was so devastating and so unexpected that the golden prince stood from
his seat in rage, legs carrying him as swiftly as possible from his father’s study to the nearest desk where he scrawled a note, marked with a seal of emergency and addressed to the only one who could ever help him now.

His brother.

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Thryheim smelt of pine.

The bouquets that decorated the halls and tables were garbed with tufts of needles, the large, soft cushioned furniture was carved from pine wood, and the bed sheets were fresh with the bright scent of evergreens.

When Loki and Thor were younger, Frigga and Odin took them to Thryheim on a diplomatic visit. It was a time before either boy had any idea of politics or formalities. They had been entranced by the snow that was thicker upon the ground than they had ever seen before. Loki remembered playing in it all day, he and Thor fighting to bury each other under the frozen heaps.

Loki and Darcy had arrived in Tyr’s province in the early morning and were greeted by a few reluctant Lords who had been dragged from their beds by servants to receive their guests. They seemed disgruntled upon Darcy’s appearance, as they had no doubt heard word of her early morning meetings that lasted as long as need be.

Their relief was palpable when Darcy admitted to her tiredness and they gratefully bid a few handmaids to usher her away to a room in the great stone castle.

Loki was led to his own room as well and offered clothes. He denied them as he much preferred to conjure his own attire. He liked the ability to create fashions of his own imagination. They were a design, made from his own magic, that he felt defined him personally. He was a firm believer that the individuality formed through the making of his own clothes could not be mimicked by anyone.

The stay in his own room lasted only a few minutes before he was in Darcy’s room, collapsing onto her bed as she struggled to maneuver herself under the sheets with the several layers of clothing the Thryians gave her to wear.

Loki fell asleep almost immediately; the chill of Thryheim soothed his breathing and gave him comfort he sometimes found in colder environments.

But his easy slumber did not last. He awoke not an hour later to Darcy’s chattering teeth and frozen hands.

Tiredly he considered a warming spell, but he had learned that they were far from practical. If they were in harsh, freezing lands such as Jotunheim’s endless tundra, a warming spell was useful because it produced heat within a person’s body, causing their core temperature to rise when it began to drop.

The chill of Thryheim was not nearly severe enough for a warming spell. He could always cast the illusion of heat which would soothe her well enough. But he did not wish for her to remain cold, even if she did not feel that she was.

He came upon his final solution with hesitation and a shade of reluctance.

The most ancient and effective key to warming one’s self as well as another had nothing to do with magic at all. His and Darcy’s combined body heat would be enough to stop her shivering.
He sat up and she watched as he grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head.

Loki could only admit to himself the hint of shame he felt about his own appearance. Thor was considered, at least by the ladies of the court, the more desirable brother. Blonde hair and bulging muscles were beloved qualities of a man and Loki had neither.

Some might argue that Loki could at least change his body. He could train with Thor or Hogun, Volstagg and Fandral or maybe even Sif who had a newfound tolerance for him.

Yet, training with them without the use of magic, relying on physical strength alone, would be an even larger display of his weakness and he did not wish for anyone to see that either.

Because of this, he was stuck with his lankiness. He’d grown a great deal in the past year and he looked now like someone had stretched out his limbs and shoulders, leaving him skinny and angular.

But Darcy was cold and he trusted her more than anyone. He did not even want to begin to think that his body of all things would change her opinion of him.

She caught onto his thinking and grasped at the end of her many nightgowns with trembling hands. Loki’s heart ached as she did so. He often tried to defend his pride by disguising his worry for her, but he always found himself slipping up. It had become almost instinctual to look after her as he did.

He worried for her in the mornings when he woke up and she was already dressed and reading like she’d been up the entire night, and when they sat in the library, absorbed in their own projects and she would suddenly clasp a hand over her heart and reach for him like the universe was falling to pieces.

He knew something was wrong, but she would not tell him what it was and he was at a loss on how to help her.

In some strange way, he liked it that she was cold. He could fix her discomfort if not the other hardships she insisted on facing alone.

Darcy was shaking so violently that it was difficult for her to take the hem of gown. Gently, he took it for her, and she sat up allowing him to lift the garments over her head so she was left in two shifts made of thinner material. Quickly, so that she would not have time to adhere to the cold, he threw the many furs and sheets of the bed over top of them, pulling her to him. She huddled closer, pressing her chilled face against his chest and her frigid fingers to his sides.

Loki forced himself to stay awake until her breathing settled and her body relaxed. Only then did he let himself sleep.

Hours later, he awoke to that telltale smell of pine.

He inhaled deeply, reveling in the scent before opening his eyes to his friend. She was radiant, her dark hair tousled and eyes so bright that the skin below them was shadowed and dark. In her lap was a stack of Loki’s notes that focused on his theories about transporting one’s self to the galaxies outside of Yggdrasil.

These theories were quite vague for he had no scientific proof that any of them would work. Ideally, if he could find some way to travel through the vast space that separated the Nine Realms and the Other Worlds, he could get them there easily. But thus far, he’d only come up with a couple ideas that both involved speed rather than portals. It was a necessary component to space
travel.

Rolling onto his back, Loki watched her for a moment, admiring the way her bottom lip stuck out while she thought and how at calm she seemed with her back against the great polished headboard, her body all wrapped up in furs.

Her eyes drifted from her reading to rest their gaze upon him. She smiled, setting the notes aside.

“Do not say it,” he grumbled, knowing what words came with that charming smile of hers.

“Your hair’s messy,” she told him anyways, running her fingers through a few strands, her short nails lightly scraping against his scalp.

She laughed and he groaned, throwing an arm over his eyes. “You are a cruel woman."

Darcy hummed in agreement, adjusting her position so she was lying beside him, her head on his shoulder. The arm that previously covered his eyes, wrapped around her shoulders holding her to him. They linked fingers, their joined hands sitting on his chest.

“Frank and Fenrir aren’t here.” Darcy commented, her voice still riddled with grogginess though Loki could tell it was already quite late in the morning.

He pressed his lips together, debating if the trouble their pets could cause was worth getting out of bed yet. “They will be fine, I am sure. The citizens of Thryheim on the other hand…”

Darcy giggled, the side of her mouth brushed against his skin and Loki acknowledged that he was still in a state of undress. He caught her eye as she looked up at him. He considered for a moment if it made her uncomfortable. As far as he knew, Darcy did not have a great deal of experience with shirtless men, but it was possible that his appearance was unappealing or repulsive to her. And he would not want that to hinder her opinion of him.

She was no longer cold, yet he remained what Asgardians considered indecent.

Then again, Darcy was not Asgardian and he spent every night in her bed, which was perhaps the most indecent thing he could ever do. He thought it best just to ask her. “Does it bother you?”

She quirked a grin. “Does what bother me?”

He swallowed, suddenly unsure if he wished to know the answer. He’d been rejected by Asgardian standards and he was not prepared for the same sentiment from Darcy. But the question had already been asked and he was not petty enough to revoke his inquiry now.

He nodded, almost timidly, to the front-side of his body. “This.”

Darcy took a second to understand his gesture, smirking a bit once she deciphered his question. She looked up to him, preparing to respond smartly. But when her blue eyes met his green ones, she stopped.

Loki suddenly feared that this was the dreadful moment of refusal he’d anticipated. She broke from their embrace, propping herself up on an elbow to scrutinize his face. It was frightening how well Darcy could read him. He could hide from her neither his insecurity nor his curiosity. Shaking her head at him, she cupped his cheek in her hand. “Loki, you’re so stupid.”

Relief washed over him followed by a wave of humility. Was he really so thick that he could not get past something as superficial as his appearance?
Darcy’s fingers slipped into his hair again, eyes soft and lips curved into a thoughtful pout. “You’re beautiful.”

Warmth passed through him so strongly that he feared his insides might melt. Darcy’s cheeks were blushed pink and Loki felt that he should say something. He was tempted not to believe her compliment, but it sounded so true coming from her mouth that the Asgardian scholars might consider it fact.

Carefully, he touched the hand cradling his head, smoothing his fingertips over the exposed skin of her forearm, and letting his magic flow through her. She closed her eyes as he gave her his silent thanks. The gift of friendship she had bestowed upon him was worth nothing less than all of himself.

He parted his lips to tell her that she was the most beautiful person he’d ever known. But his speech was interrupted by the door to Darcy’s chambers opening with an enthusiastic bang and the eager voice of High Lord Tyr reverberating about the room.

“Good Morning, Darcy! I must say, while your pets are charming company I thought I might rouse you from…”

He trailed off as his eyes fell upon the two of them curled up together in the center of Darcy’s bed with spare articles of clothing scattered around the floor.

Loki retracted his magic and Darcy sat up, her hands held out before her defensively. “Tyr, it’s not what it looks like.”

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“Lady Sigyn is a good friend of mine as well as Sif’s,” Darcy said lightly, her grin glowing in the warm firelight of Tyr’s hearth. “You would like her. She speaks in riddles more often than not.”

Loki smiled; poking Darcy in the ribs as she leaned back against his chest, stretching her legs out between his and sipping hot tea. She elbowed him in the belly, getting comfortable once more.

Lord Tyr was, Loki had to admit, an okay person.

He was charming company and he also thought nothing of the fact that Loki and Darcy had shared a bed. They had, of course, explained that their arrangement was completely chaste and that their relationship was purely platonic. But Tyr didn’t seem to care about that either, mostly because he refused to believe that they did not have a secret passion for one another.

It was a funny sort of idea to romanticize and Darcy teased him about reading too many gossip articles that held occasional features on the potential clandestine courtship between him and Darcy. No matter, it soothed Loki to know that they did not have a secret passion for one another.

Being that Lord Tyr did not have it out to make Loki’s life more complicated than it needed to be, the prince felt it was perfectly acceptable to be sociable with him.

What Loki did not expect was to like Tyr so much. He was begrudging to accept the fact that there was a High Lord anywhere on Asgard that he could even remotely tolerate, but Tyr was utterly ridiculous and reminded him a bit of Darcy. It was his nonsensicality that Loki liked. So rare was it to find any official that could act simultaneously common and noble. While his attitude and
enthusiasm would have Loki believe him to be of peasant origin, his wealth and education was astounding, as were his skills in leading a province. Darcy had much more to say on that, but Loki could appreciate that it was difficult to keep such a large province neutral.

Their day was going splendidly thus far.

Lord Tyr bubbled over their presence and told no one of their sleeping predicament. He showed them around Thryheim all morning, taking them through the snowy gardens and introducing them to a few of his favorite trees which he had named. He even knew the parentage of said trees, and claimed that they were all women.

The Lord was infatuated with Jörmungandr and Fenrir and continuously tossed sticks for them to go retrieve as they toured his castle grounds.

They were introduced to the members of his small court and his advisor, Verig, who had the thick accent of a Norn. Loki tried not to let that influence his opinion of him. No one could help where they were raised. Yet there was something that he truly did not like about the man. Darcy exchanged a few words with him and Loki watched her eyes search him thoroughly. Perhaps she found nothing, for she did not bring him up after they departed from the court members.

They sat now, in the mid afternoon, inside a snug pit beside the fireplace. Each room had a space set before the hearth, a small set of stairs leading to a cozy place where cushions and furs were strewn about so that small groups of people could lay beside the heat and enjoy each other’s company. Darcy was doing a fine job entertaining them with stories of his and Sigyn’s relationship.

Tyr had nearly pushed Loki and Darcy together in his insistence that they cease all restraint. He went on a tirade about how ridiculous it was that Asgardians associated the limitation of passion with class.

Loki had no argument for that, especially since his agreement meant he could hold Darcy closer, which was always nice. She smelled comforting and having her entrapped by his presence meant that he could both annoy her and make her laugh.

Tyr sat across from them with his ankles propped up on a cushion, laughing merrily. “I know of Lady Sigyn’s parents! High Lord and Lady of Jolena! They are much like my parents were.” He made a face. “Unfortunately for her and I both.” He sighed shortly, melancholy switching quickly to merriment. “I still cannot believe that the two of you insist on not being together. It is almost too odd for me to comprehend when you seem so…” he trailed off, gesturing to them as if their very existence explained it all.

Loki smirked. “Truth is strange; stranger than fiction.”

Lord Tyr’s eyes widened for a moment in shock, or perhaps recognition, before brushing off the look and gushing on with his questions on their friendship. “Tell me, for I am one of those dull breeds of the gods, how is it that you two met?” He settled his chin in his palm with a dopey smile on his face, “I must know.”

Loki chuckled, knowing that he and Darcy had always left this part ambiguous to most. They had never lied, it was always just assumed that Darcy was of lower class originally and they did not speak of her heritage for fear of shame.

But they would have to lie to Tyr.

He prepared to let his Silvertongue fly with a story when a deafening screech emanated from
outside a window.

The noise caused Darcy to jump, spilling steamy tea all over her hand. She yelped in pain and Loki worked to make sense of the small bout of chaos.

A raven beat its wings against one of the windows, a message sealed with the royal crest in its claws.

Loki knew a royal summons when he saw one and knew that this must be a time of great emergency for one to call on him when he was fulfilling a duty given to him by his mother.

Using magic, he opened the window, allowing the raven to land beside him. Darcy scowled at it and nursed her fresh burn. Loki glowered at the red splotch on her pale skin, bringing the back of her hand to his lips, kissing away the wound.

Tyr slapped his hands over his chest. “You both will be the death of me. I swear it, you are far too perfect.” He sighed as lovers often do, falling back against his furs. “Just continue to exist as you do and I shall be content.”

Loki rolled his eyes in good humor at Tyr, receiving the note from the raven’s talons. He read it in confusion.

“What’s wrong?” Darcy asked, tilting her head to read the message as well.

“Thor demands my presence and my presence only,” Loki said dryly. “Apparently there has been an emergency.” He read through the note again, worry nipping at him as he saw the rushed smear his brother had left on the parchment. “Will you come?”

She squeezed his hand. “If you need me too.” She squinted at the letter. “Although, it is marked with the royal stamp; I don’t know if I’m supposed to be there.”

Loki ground his teeth. The ‘royal stamp’ declared any message delivered a personal matter of the royal family. If Thor requested only his company, it was probably a subtle way of saying that he did not want anyone else, including Darcy, to know of his dilemma. “Very well. I shall take myself to the palace magically and I will try to be back as soon as possible.”

Darcy nodded, standing up with him. He turned his attention to Lord Tyr who was smiling respectfully. “I am sorry to say that I must cut our meeting short, Tyr. I hope I will not be detained for long.”

The High Lord waved him off. “Is no matter, Loki! Another time! We have plenty of that, don’t we? I’m sure Darcy and I will find something to talk of in your absence.”

A twinge of annoyance bit into his heart. Whatever was happening had better be important. He was leaving Darcy in Thryheim. Alone. With Tyr. Without him.

He pushed these feelings away and bowed his head to give Darcy his attention. Her eyebrows came together in apprehension. “If it’s anything too bad, come and get me, okay?”

“Of course,” he said, pressing his thumb to the wrinkle between her brows. “When you gossip of me this evening, remain sympathetic to my memory, would you?”

“Of course,” she swore, linking their pinkies for a second before he disappeared in a flash of golden light.
“I am betrothed.”

The dark haired prince stared at his brother who had delivered this news so somberly; one might have thought that someone had died with the amount of anguish he stated his engagement. It dawned upon Loki that Thor had messaged him, claiming a royal crisis because the Allfather had made the decision to sign off his eldest son’s bachelor years.

The whole ordeal was too much for Loki to take. He threw his head back in laughter, nearly choking on his Silvertongue in attempt to breathe through the spectacular hysterias.

Nostrils flared and hands gesturing wildly towards the palace, Thor angrily addressed his brother. “Loki! There is no humor in this!”

Loki wrapped an arm around his middle, trying to find enough air to respond. “You are to be wed?”

“Obviously!” Thor shouted, his hands going to his hair. “I cannot be married, especially not to her…”

“To whom?” Loki managed, still chortling a bit.

Thor threw head back. “To Sigyn, who else?!”

This brought Loki’s amusement to an end. “I am courting Sigyn. We did not end our courtship.”

The blonde prince took his brother by the shoulders and shook him hard. “Did you not hear anything that I said?!”

Loki pushed him off, contemplating his circumstances. His and Sigyn’s relationship had not been going well. At one time, Loki felt that he and Sigyn had felt for one another romantically. But as time went on, Loki found himself considering Sigyn more a friend than anything. He still enjoyed her company and appreciated her council, yet he did not wish to kiss her or tell her loving things. He’d supposed that for the sake of Asgard he would continue their courtship.

Often times he imagined that he should be more like Thor and Fandrall and flirt with women rather than dedicating himself to only one. The idea of being adored by women, or anyone really, who desired him as he desired them, was appealing. Though Loki was not sure if he wanted into the sport as much as his brother.

As much as he loved tricks, going to bed with a woman who was under the illusion that she might lie with someone who wished to have her forever was disagreeable to him.

Originally Thor had wooed barmaids and tavern wenches, but Loki had read Darcy’s reports and found that a great deal of money had been spent at the brothel. So perhaps Thor had quit flirting entirely and moved onto less artful ways of which to be with women.

Either way, Loki could not see why anyone would want to lie with his brother.

Loki did not particularly need to be courting anyone. Kissing Sigyn was nice enough, but he could go without. What bothered him about her sudden betrothal to Thor is that he did not have any say in the end of their relationship. She said nothing to him about it and no public announcement had been made about the anticipated end. He wondered if he’d done something to upset her that she had ended it prematurely.
Then he realized the truth of the circumstances.

He was a prince.

Sigyn was a lady.

She would not be the one to terminate their courtship. Legally, since she was still under the control of her parents, either they would call an end to it or Loki would have to. Loki had not done it, so it must have been Sigyn’s parents.

But a Lord would not just call an end to their daughter’s courtship with a prince unless there was a more honorable position offered to them.

And that left the one person Loki hadn’t taken into account.

Odin Allfather.

He covered his hurt in a grimace.

Of course it would be his own father that would take one of his closest friends and give them to his brother for marriage.

Thor moaned, collapsing into a chair. They were in Thor’s quarters, holed up in the dark. The drapes were drawn and Thor was nursing a headache. Loki thought his suffering was humorous at first, but his father’s decisions had put a damper on his hilarity. With a wave of his hand, he brought about his brother's sobriety. “Enough of your whining, brother. You called me here for what purpose other than to tell me that you were engaged?”

Thor stared at him, first with thankfulness then with frustration. “Loki, do you not understand the severity of this situation?”

Loki paced the room, reaching a window and tugging aside the embroidered drapes. “I understand that you have been put to an arranged marriage. Such proposals are common amongst royalty.”

“Loki…” he began pleadingly, searching for the right words. “I do not know what to do. I…I cannot be married,” he said, mainly to himself as he slouched in his chair.

The dark prince sighed, willing himself to look past his own woes, putting himself, as the Midgardians say, into Thor’s shoes. He would not wish to be married so soon. He had years left to live free of marital expectation and marriage would only be a hindrance to his plans.

Though, no matter how thoroughly he understood his brother’s pain, he did not know how to help him. The Allfather had already decided the marriage with Sigyn’s parents and unless either Thor or Sigyn renounced their titles, the wedding would go on.

Loki frowned, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “There is not much anyone can do, Thor, unless the Allfather decides otherwise.”

Thor shook his head. “He will not. He sees me as an insult to the throne.”

“Well…” Loki began and Thor scowled.

“I want to have fun. Loki! Merriment! Entertainment! Friends! Are these not the things we live for?” he asked, standing up and throwing his arms about. “I am not ready to relinquish these things in exchange for one woman who I must keep for the rest of my life.” He leaned his head back,
staring at the ceiling. “Besides, she does not even like me.”

Loki did not like feeling pity for Thor. With his recent actions, he had this marriage coming for him. But Thor was right in a sense. Court life was boring and Loki lived for his time with Darcy. Although, their explorations tended to be a bit more dangerous than Thor’s bar fights.

“Come now, brother,” Loki tried, “I am sure it will not be all that horrible. Your engagement has not officially been announced and it may not be for a few years yet. You have time, perhaps even enough time to right your ways.”

“Or more time to enjoy them,” Thor grumbled, standing up.

Crossing his arms, he glared at the golden prince. Thor wished dearly to be King of Asgard one day, but Loki wondered if that was truly what Thor wanted. He was so obstinate to the monotonous life of the court that Loki felt his brother did not know himself. Perhaps Thor liked only the idea of being King.

“Do you think Sigyn knows of this?” Thor asked. “If so, I think I might like to speak with her.”

“I do not know. You could ask her if she knows, I’m sure that would go over well,” Loki suggested sarcastically, absentmindedly spinning his dagger around his fingers. It was a habit he’d picked up just to have something to do with his hands while he was bored.

Thor nodded, taking his brother seriously. “I agree. Sif is practicing at the moment; we shall go ask her where I can find Sigyn.”

“We?” Loki muttered as Thor ran a hand through his hair, charging out of his quarters with hopeful vigilance.

Loki sighed, storming after him. He stowed his dagger, choosing to be bitter over the fact that he left Darcy on Thryheim simply because Thor was engaged.

The two of them stalked through the palace, hurrying to the training fields where Sif stood, surrounded by a team of twenty men armed with spears. Sif’s sword, double-sided and long, posed as an extension of herself. She spun and kicked, stabbed and blocked, taking down her opponents as if they were flies. Sweat dripped down her face and she growled, her form switching to that of a lioness as she dropped her weapons and pounced on the one remaining warrior that had the misfortune of becoming her prey.

Men groaned in heaps on the ground around her and Loki admired Sif’s proficiency. Darcy often said that Sif could probably defeat an entire army by herself and enjoy it. Victory was an addictive drug and he saw its effects now as Sif’s military brethren stood up, clapping her on the back and shoulders, congratulating her on her good work.

Sif had earned that respect and though they did not get along especially well, Loki was pleased that she was appreciated. She deserved it.

“Sif!” Thor called to her from the landing they stood on. He leapt over the ledge, running to meet his friend. Loki followed, walking at an even pace.

“Thor? What is wrong?” Sif asked as he approached her in his frantic mood. She looked at him skeptically. “You have not gotten Fandrall arrested again, have you?”

This was news to Loki, but Thor brushed off the jibe. “No. Have you seen Sigyn today?”
Sif’s dark brows came together as she glanced curiously at Loki. “Yes…why?”

“Do you know where we could find her?”

Sif blinked, wiping sweat from her face. “She was called in to see the Allfather not a few moments before training began. Thor, what is happening?”

The golden prince swore loudly in his torment and he growled to Sif under his breath. “We are engaged as of this morning.”

Sif gaped at him blankly. “What?”

“Sigyn and I,” Thor clarified darkly, “are to be wed.”

Loki watched Sif’s entire world fall. He could see it in the breath that she lost and the greenish hue her skin had taken. Sweat began to form anew on her brow and she shivered like Darcy had last night. She was ailing and Loki could only imagine why.

Thor talked on of his distress, but Sif had stopped listening. Her mind was far away and Loki feared that she might lose her afternoon meal in the dirt. Finally, she came back to the present moment and she clapped a hand on Thor’s shoulder. “I am sorry…I must go…”

She stumbled away and Loki knew that she would not make it long before her body began sore attempts at purging itself of love.

Loki considered himself an onlooker to a story that he did not quite fit into. He saw his brother’s obliviousness as he went to go after Sif and he heard, in his past, Sigyn’s riddled words of femininity. It made sense to him and, caught up in despicable sympathy, he grabbed Thor’s arm, holding him back.

“Let her be.”

“Loki...”

“Let. Her. Be.” Loki repeated, urging his brother to stand back. “I will keep you company tonight, even if you wish to drink yourself to death in sorrow, but let Sif be.”

Thor looked at Loki as if he did not recognize him. “Is she alright?”

Loki pursed his lips, staring after the dark haired warrior. “She is sick.”

“Should I fetch a healer?” His brother asked him hesitantly.

Shaking his head, Loki gestured for Thor to follow him. “No. The only healer for Sif must come on her own accord. Come now, we’ll begin the celebration of your final bachelor days with an adventure unlike any other.”

Thor smiled half-heartedly at the prospect. “Do you also wish for father to wed you off in attempt to sedate your happiness?”

Loki cocked a brow, a smile growing on his face. “You forget, Thor. I am not careless, and I have the means to make Mischief with less dramatic consequences.”

This inspired Thor to perk up and walk beside his brother as they began their path to sneak into the city. “You would risk your own future for one night?”
At this, Loki laughed. “I have risked my life for much less than that.” He stopped them for a moment, waving a hand and changing their attire to that of middle class citizens. “Now, when was the last time you leapt from a great height?”

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Darcy and Tyr were having a blast.

At first, Darcy didn’t know if she would be okay in Thryheim without Loki. She never really stayed alone in any province on Asgard without him.

But Tyr was fun. As soon as Loki left, he insisted that they play music, which Darcy told him she couldn’t do.

Asgardians instruments were quite similar to Midgardian ones, though their music system was different. They determined notes by frequency and wrote it as such, but with Asgardian terms and symbols. So, it made for a very interesting comparison. Darcy had often wondered if she had been more interested in the arts, if she would have taken up playing the masterful pieces that Aesir musicians composed and performed.

Tyr was a practitioner of many instruments, though mainly he liked a small ukulele sized one with six narrow strings and a sound that resonated through the room like a chorus.

They ate dinner early with Tyr’s advisor, Verig, whom Darcy didn’t like.

It wasn’t just that he spoke like a Norn, but rather the way he looked at her. It was sorely reminiscent of recognition, but also curiosity. She wished she knew the names of all the people who had lost Hnefatafl to Lord Bjarte. He didn’t say much throughout dinner and his somber attitude contrasted greatly with Tyr’s high energy. Apparently, he had been a gift from Tyr’s parents. They thought he needed someone to help him through his position as High Lord and hired Verig. Tyr could not turn him away because his parents employed him and he did not want to disrespect his parents.

The one thing he did mention though, aside from their small talk, was that he held High Lord Bjarte in high esteem and that he disagreed with Darcy’s petition that was eventually passed through the king’s court, to propagate learning of magic in warfare. She hadn’t initially been for it, but war was a part of life on Asgard. It was a thing that people liked and glorified. If magic was successful and useful in battle, then it would be appreciated in everyday life. It had taken a lot of talking on her part, several essays and even more social experiments to prove that this was something that needed to be done.

In the end, Odin’s word declared that her ‘silly petition’ would be passed.

She would have bitten his head off if her mouth had been big enough.

Verig was not her favorite and he made it very clear that he did not like her either. Darcy was ever gracious, not purposefully provoking the advisor in any way. It was a tense meal as Tyr, ever the neutral party, tried to make peace of the situation.

Darcy kept the peace, but Verig challenged her, as one advisor to another, asking if her dedication was to Asgard or its prince. Darcy answered simply enough by saying that she was dedicated to the good of Yggdrasil, and all who lived within. And after that, Verig did not speak to her again.

After their meal, Tyr asked if Darcy would join him for tea in his chambers. Darcy had spent enough time on Asgard that she was skeptical of entering his room. But she relented because Tyr
was her friend and tea on Thryheim was sharp and tasted faintly like pine.

They sat before the hearth in his room while he played his six-stringed instrument and sang silly songs about everything and anything. He laughed the entire time and Darcy wondered why it was that Tyr did not court anyone.

As far as Darcy knew from reading through past published media, Tyr had been Asgard’s number one bachelor since after the Great War. And yet he never wed, and he never courted. Darcy thought that Tyr might be gay, but for some reason she suspected that it was more than that. If Tyr did have a male lover, he probably would have already asked Odin if they could get married at the palace.

“Darcy,” Tyr began, strumming a few vibrant chords, singing her name like a well known song. “Sing me a tune.”

She shook her head, leaning back against some pillows, wiggling her bare toes before the fire. “Nah. I can’t sing.”

He clicked his tongue, setting his instrument aside and plopping down between Frank and Fenrir, both of whom fell into his lap. They loved Tyr because he spoiled them. He asked that bilgesnipe flanks be finely prepared and seasoned, one for each of the animals. He served them their meals on silver platters and told them to enjoy it.

And enjoy it they did. They did three whole seconds of enjoying.

Tyr thought they were cute. Darcy thought that Loki would be chiding them on manners if he were there.

“Well, tell me a secret then.” He said, scratching Fenrir’s belly.

Darcy smiled coyly at him. “A secret?”

Tyr beamed, nodding vigorously. “Yes! Tell me a secret about you and Loki. I wish to know.”

Darcy giggled at the prospect. Tyr was every stereotypical teenage girl at a sleepover. It was adorable. “Hmm. Loki and I?” she thought about it as the Lord waited in anticipation. “One day, about a year ago, I skipped all of my meetings and studies to sit with him in the gardens. Every hour we spent out there, he created a new breed of flower. By the end of the day, I had six new flowers.”

The Lord waited for her to continue, Frank’s head sitting atop of his and Fenrir sprawled across him like an oversized lapdog. “What happened to the flowers?”

“They died,” Darcy said with a shrug and Tyr looked like she had just told him his best friend had perished in a fire.

“But he created six new breeds of flowers for you!” Tyr insisted, clearly devastated. “How could you let them die?!!”

Darcy smiled, thinking of the flowers. “They were unique and beautiful and different from every other living thing. But they had no equal. Such powerful and magnificent flowers could not live on. They were meant to die.”

Tyr shook his head furiously. “That was a ridiculous secret. I hated it. I must request a specific secret in order to evade such absurdity.”
Rolling onto her stomach, Darcy fit her chin in her hand, ready for a challenge. “Alright, hit me.”

He leaned forwards, bowing their heads together as if someone might hear them. “Today, Loki said something that struck me as peculiar. He said ‘truth is strange; stranger than fiction’ and I recognized this! It is from a text of a different realm.”

Darcy bit her lip, trying to hide her humor.

Loki had a bad habit of spitting poetry. He loved Midgardian poetry as well as just about any piece of classical literature he could get his hands on. He absorbed all of it like a sponge and if you poked him in the right spot, he would release it. But it was most unusual that Tyr should be aware of it.

“He is studious of many things, not just magic as many believe,” Darcy responded vaguely.

“So you say…” Tyr trailed off, looking down as if in the midst of a great decision. “I suppose I should tell you a secret. You see Darcy, I am a romantic.”

“Really?” Darcy gasped satirically, “I had no freakin’ idea!”

Tyr laughed, shoving her playfully. “No! You did not let me finish!” he cleared his throat, composing himself with a serious expression once more. “I am a romantic and I have an obsession with Midgardian literature.”

Darcy’s eyebrows pushed into her hairline and Tyr rushed to explain himself.

“They understand and express emotion to an extent that I have come to believe Aesir cannot show! But yet they depict stories much like our own upper class. Where emotion is shunned and yet there are people who cannot hold back their passion! They fall in love! Mortals have written of love deeper than any Asgardian has ever felt! And Darcy…” he stared into her eyes most acutely, his brown irises warm and begging her to understand. “…I adore love.”

Darcy had a strong urge to laugh, not because Tyr was truly a hopeless romantic, but because he spoke such truth. “Asgardians are scared to love,” Darcy agreed and Tyr looked like he could cry with the relief he now felt.

“You understand,” he sighed, laughing breathlessly. “Have you read Midgardian literature then? Love through the eyes of mortals? Has Loki? Consider this your secret.”

Nodding, Darcy did not try to hide her amusement. An Asgardian that actually appreciated mortals was a rare Asgardian indeed. “I’ve read a lot actually. Loki likes the romantic poets. He reads Bécquer, Tennyson, Byron, Dickinson, Poe… I like the novels.”

Tyr moaned, gathering Frank and Fenrir in his arms and holding them close. “Oh Darcy, I have never met anyone who has shared my literary diversity. I must write Loki and beg him for recommendations. I cannot get enough. I find myself reading the same works over and over, entranced with emotion.”

Darcy laughed with him, sharing his happiness. She’d never imagined that one being could ooze passion as Tyr did. It was not misery, just enthusiasm. He was ready for whatever feeling inspired him. It was a dangerous way to live in the position he held, but Darcy thought he handled himself well.

They talked of Mary Shelly and the Brontës, Tolsty and Dostoyevsky, Dickens and Austen. They touched briefly on Li Baojio and other writers of political fiction, which Darcy found most
entertaining, but she soon discovered that Tyr’s interests lay only in love stories. He could talk all the way back to Shakespeare and knew of authors that Darcy had never heard of. Darcy realized that Tyr had been picking up Midgardian literature for hundreds of years, the past few centuries he accumulated favorites and loves. He told her that he’d not been down to get new material in the past century.

Finally, Tyr broke from his endless rambling on literature, looking at her like she’d given him the world. “Darcy, thank you. You have no idea how much this talk has meant to me. You are marvelous.”

She winked. “I am pretty great, aren’t I?”

He chuckled, staring into the fire for a moment, idly scratching Frank’s head. “Darcy?”

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat nervously. “I was wondering if I might confide in you a matter most secret.”

She nodded eagerly. “Of course.”

Tyr took her hands. “I mean it Darcy. You cannot tell a soul.”

With great sincerity, she placed her fist over her heart. “I swear it.”

They shared a deep look for a moment before Tyr’s brilliant smile returned. “I must tell you a story about myself first.”

“Alright.” Darcy settled in her furs, getting comfortable and waiting for Tyr to speak.

He stood up, because there was no possible way the High Lord Tyr of Thryheim could dare to stay sitting while telling a story.

“When I was younger, I hated my parents. Till this day, I hold a certain abhorrence to their very existence,” he said bitterly and the tone sounded off when he used it. “They raised me to be proper. They taught me to fight formally and with sword because it was the weapon of a lord. They made me practice piety through restraint. They told me that I must learn to be the best man that I could be to win a wife worthy of my title and that I should give her my children to continue my good name.” He made gestures while speaking, as Tyr was forever the truest of entertainers.

“I hated it. I despised everything I had come to be and I spent the days itching to run. To break free. To live as I wanted. I considered abandoning my title and running away, but I did not have the courage of my dear sister. So I suffered in silence.”

He stopped, staring into the fire. “Then came the war.”

Darcy waited to hear his perspective. She’s read one of his published journals in which he proved to be just as racist against Frost Giants as the rest of Asgard. Though she’d found his writing to be oddly poetic. Now she knew why.

“It was brutal,” he said. “My parents wrote to Odin and asked him if he would make me one of his officers. Me, their son, who had just reached his adolescence nearing the end of the war, they asked if I could be there. If I could fight, and kill, and possibly die.

“Odin, who was running low on soldiers at the last few years of the war, accepted me and I traveled by bifrost to Jotunheim where I froze and fought and nearly died by the hand of Laufey.
"The day the war was meant to end, I was wounded and scared, but Odin came to me. He asked me to fight this last day with him. He asked me to lead his army into the city and lay waste to Laufey’s palace. I accepted because he was my king and I was honored.” Tyr perked up a bit. “And I led us to victory.”

“We returned from the war and I was fresh in my adolescence, about your age I think.” He paused, growing somber once again. ”This is my secret for you, Darcy. My mother had a child during that year. A beautiful little girl with a little tuft of black hair on her head.” He made an angry noise and when he spoke again he sounded close to tears.

“This is why I hate my parents. I do not wish to, I respect them because they are mine and I have no choice. But I cannot love them as they are because they refused to love their children as they were.

“Sif was born with black hair. They hired a number of sorceresses, sworn to secrecy, to turn her hair blonde. I begged them not to and I was punished for my apparent anguish. They never told Sif she had been born with black hair and I could not bring myself to do it because I wanted her to feel like our parents loved her. I wanted her to have love because when I came home from the war…” he trailed off, smiling to himself, “I knew that she was mine to take care of. I had more love for this tiny child than I ever had for anyone and I vowed that she would never be without someone who cared for her. I did not want her to be lonely as I had been.”

Darcy’s heart ached, but there was also a moment of clarity for her. When Sif’s hair was burned off those years ago and Loki grew it back, there had been no mistake on his part. It was not his fault. She continued to listen assiduously to her host.

“I also wrote Odin after the war. He was the father I never had and I knew that he cared a great deal for me as I did for him. I was happy for a few years. Then came the year before my adulthood began.”

Tyr sneered at the memory and such a look on his kind face frightened Darcy. She wanted to hold him. Tyr was precious and it pained her when he hurt. “My parents planned for me to be wed on the day my adolescence came to a close. And after that, they expected children.

“I was furious because I did not wish to give them this. I wanted, and I still want, love. I want life and happiness and I did not want to conform to their silly rules any longer. I wrote Odin and told him of my predicament and he wrote that he would contact me in a few days with something that might help.

“I could not wait that long. My adolescence ended in but two days and I was desperate. So, I sent a raven to find Idun with my request for an apple. And later that day, the raven returned with a golden letter that asked me for my deepest, darkest secret.” He turned to her, eyes glazed over with emotion.

“I wrote down my secret and sent it to her. The next day, I ate my apple and I never became an adult.”

Darcy was entirely absorbed in his past. And she could see it now. It made sense why he looked so young and why he acted so uninhibited. Darcy waited in earnest for him to continue.

Turning back to her, Tyr grinned. “I didn’t get married. My parents burned with rage and threatened to disown me, but the day of my would-be wedding, I received a letter from Odin declaring that I was the new High Lord of Thryheim and I was to take my new position immediately.
“I wanted to take Sif with me. She was a child, a babe, and I was worried for her, stuck with our parents who did not know how to love. I offered to take her and they refused.” His tone seeped acid. “I visited her as often as I could, which was at least twice a week. I called her my ‘little sun’ and she called me ‘big sun’. I tried to raise her as my own. I told her not to be afraid and to do what she loved to do.

“Never, in all my life, would I have believed that she would abide by my teachings so willfully. I never thought that she would abandon her titles to be a warrior. It broke my heart at first that I could not see her. But I knew that one day she would succeed.” He grinned down at Darcy. “And here is this lady that strides into Asgardian politics like she was born to rule and she tells me that my little sister is everything that I knew she would be!”

Tyr got down on his knees and kissed her hands. “And I love you for it, Advisor Darcy. I love you for being my sister’s friend, just as I love Prince Thor and Lady Sigyn for being her friends. I would invite you all to live with me if only that was how things worked. And Loki as well, because I think he is charming and you two are in love. It would be cruel to separate you.” He finished as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Darcy laughed and then stared at this person who she felt like she was just coming to know. And, as usual, she had questions. “Was it really so horrible? Getting married? Are you so opposed to the idea of marriage that you have stayed single all these years?”

Tyr shook his head, a sad smile on his face. “No. Not at all. Darcy, I want to love someone more than anything. I want romance and passion and love. I want a person to love me as fully and as wholly as I love them.”

Darcy shook her head, lost in confusion. “Then why…?”

He gave her a sideways glance, his eyes glowing with shyness in the firelight. His lips twitched just a bit as he spoke, mouth preparing for a timorous betrayal. “No one wants a lover who won’t make love.”

Darcy’s heart gave out. She was going to cry. Scratch that, she was crying. Tears spilled from her eyes, each one for Tyr, because he had so much love to give and no one yet to give it to. She cried because he didn’t believe anyone could ever love him. “Tyr, that isn’t true.”

He chuckled good-naturedly, wiping her tears away with his shirt sleeve. “Darcy, I’m sure that if my life were to be one of those novels I love so much, I would not be either of the lovers I sorely wish to be. I am the wealthy uncle.”

She laughed through her tears, crying even harder. She blamed Tyr and all his love that no one would accept. “You’re not…” she choked, “I’ll love you, you idiot boy.”

“You are already in love, silly girl,” he chided, scooting closer and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Now stop crying or I’ll start as well and we shall both be a mess.”

Darcy didn’t stop and it took them ten minutes to stop sobbing. Eventually it ended because they looked so ridiculous to one another with their eyes swollen and noses wet that they began to snicker and soon became overwhelmed with giggles and laughter.

They spent a great deal of the night in front of the dying fire, Darcy promising with all her heart that she would find someone for Tyr to love.

When she could no longer keep her eyes open, Tyr sent her to bed with Frank and Fenrir trotting
along behind her. Crawling into bed in her shift, she waited for Loki. And no sooner had she slid between the sheets and blown out the candles by the bedpost closest to her, Loki appeared.

He removed his boots, snuggling up to her without his shirt as he had the night before. She meant to ask him where he’d been, but she was tired and far too caught up in being glad that he had come back to her that night. She always slept better at home.

***

Earlier that day…

Sigyn walked to the Allfather’s study with as much poise as she could muster.

It was rare that anyone besides the princes were ever summoned to Odin’s study. It was considered a place of peace and a royal conference room. It was a place of the royal family and an honor for Sigyn to go there.

Only recently, Sigyn had discovered something:

She truly hated the life of royalty.

She had ceased her attempts to keep up with hers and Loki’s relationship. He was her friend and she felt no romantic pull towards him. But it was more than her feelings towards Loki that was pulling her away from their courtship.

She despised, with all her being, the life of a princess.

Officially courting a prince meant that she was bid to go to all of his public outings, dance with him on all formal events, and was given opportunities to bond with the people and allow them to see her for who she truly was.

Sigyn found very quickly that she did not like this. It was not that she did not like herself and it was not that she did not think people would like her; it was that she did not wish to be their role model.

She did not like the life she lived. She did not like that she was courting a prince for his title and she did not like that she was so subservient to her parents will. She did not like that she tolerated the torture of being described only as ‘beautiful’ because that was the only thing anyone ever took the time to notice about her.

She wanted the people, of Asgard to have a princess who fought for what she thought was right and who could feel more than fear when looking onto a crowd of her future people. She wanted the Princess of Asgard to be Darcy. Not ‘someone like Darcy’, for there was no one like Darcy. There was no one else who understood them and who was so personable and easy for the Aesir to love.

Sigyn could not be Asgard’s princess, because she could not be true to them.

Sigyn wanted to be honest, and if she were to marry Loki, swear upon the Nine Realms and herself that she loved him and that she would guard the people of Asgard with her life, it would be a lie.

And the mere thought of Sigyn giving up Sif’s place in her bed, to no longer hold her close, feel her heart beat through the night and wake to the smell of her hair, was heartbreaking. Her body protested that this luxury that she’d felt the past couple of years, of sharing her life and her likes and dislikes, passions and creations with this magnificent warrior would soon be gone.

Her gut wrenched and the thought made her want to vomit. But she bit back her bile, making her way to the Allfather with grave curiosity.
Too soon, she stood before the Allfather’s study doors in an expensive silver dress that
complimented her eyes. The guards nodded to her approvingly, opening the doors to allow her
inside.

It was a beautiful room and the minute Sigyn saw it, she thought of Darcy and Loki. Thousands of
books decked the shelves, the chamber lead off into two different directions, mysteries waiting at
either end. Her mystery sat at the desk in the center of the room, facing the door and glaring at her
with a sentiment Sigyn could not decipher.

“Please, come in Lady Sigyn,” beckoned the Allfather and Sigyn could not refuse.

“Thank you, your Highness.” She curtsied, approaching his desk and sitting in the chair he
gestured to.

Sigyn stared at Odin Allfather and tried not to appear as skeptical as she was. In confidence, Darcy
had ranted of Odin’s nature and his reluctance towards her. Sigyn sensed none of this reluctance.
On the contrary, Odin seemed almost happy to see her. Only she couldn’t be certain as he wasn’t
smiling and he didn’t give any other indication that he was pleased to see her at all.

It was his attention that led her to believe his pleasure at her presence. It was rare that someone
other than her closest friends ever gave her their full attention. But Odin had his one blue eye upon
her, fully attentive.

“Lady Sigyn, you are a most esteemed lady, a fine member of Asgardian society, and a well known
beauty,” The King said, each of his sharp, clipped words paralyzing her with fear. What was his
purpose? He did not call her here simply to compliment her.

She swallowed. “Thank you, Allfather.”

He continued on as if she hadn’t spoken and Sigyn understood what Darcy meant about him being
a ‘passive ass’ as she called him.

“You have been courting Prince Loki Odinson for two years now and it is no mystery to the realm
that your courtship is soon to be over.”

Sigyn waited, unsure of what to do. Her palms were sweating and Odin’s gaze was firm. Did he
mean to end her and Loki’s courtship? Did he mean to tell her that she could no longer court Loki
or that he did not like her as a Princess? She wished he would get to the point.

“Your courtship with Loki ends today, Lady Sigyn. You will not be Princess of Asgard.”

Sigyn wondered if relief could take a form. If so, she imagined that it would be a butterfly the
color of Sif’s eyes that beat its wings against the gust of breath she hadn’t known she’d been
holding.

“You will be Queen of Asgard.”

The butterfly died. It died hard and fast. The butterflies’ wings turned to dust and that dust blew
away, never to be assembled again. Sigyn’s entire being froze as she stared disbelievingly at Odin
Allfather.

Now he was smiling, the bare hint of a grin tugging at his stiff, miserable line of a mouth. She
knew that smile mocked her as it would mock her till the end of her days. Sigyn wanted to scream
at him that she could not be Queen. Being Queen would entail that she marry the future King of
Asgard and that was…
“Prince Thor has accepted the arrangement most graciously and your parents were happy to give him the honor of taking your hand. Allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your engagement. I will let the two of you decide when to make a public announcement. You are dismissed.”

He finished as gracelessly as he’d begun; only now he looked as though he had solved an especially trying puzzle and was smug about it.

Sigyn stood, her legs weak as she curtsied and left the study.

Her heart seemed to have stopped beating and her mind was drifting away from her. She could not marry Thor. She could not be wed. Not now. Not to him. She could not be Queen of The Realm Eternal.

Sif’s face appeared in her thoughts, the memory of her touch warmed her face and the smell of the warrior on her skin was intoxicating.

And suddenly, Sigyn knew why she couldn’t marry Thor. Sigyn knew why her insides felt like they were being stirred with a knife and why the tears in her eyes burned hotter than fire.

She was in love.

The revelation turned her blood into air and she felt as though her heart would explode at any moment.

Sigyn turned to the guards outside of Odin’s study and beamed, bursting out into laughter so loud it would echo in that corridor forever.

Then she ran.

She ran down the halls and up the stairs. She tore the hem of her dress tripping on it. She ran into a wall, banging her elbow in the process, but she did not stop. Her legs ached and she was feverishly sick with love. She ran to the training fields, running the length of it in search of Sif. When she didn’t see her, her stomach rebelled and purged itself of everything that was holding her back.

She did not stop running.

Through the gardens she went, tearing her skirts on rose bushes as she plucked a flower in passing. She ate the rose while she ran, swallowing the sweet petals and relishing in its nectar because her body demanded love.

Finally, she came to the library and found Sif there amongst the books, sitting in a window in the tunic that she wore beneath her armor, face wet with tears and pores dripping with the traitorous love that had fooled them both.

“Sigyn…” Sif sniffed abashedly, wiping away her tears and standing up straight.

Sif said her name and Sigyn could not take the time to think about what came next.

She took two powerful steps towards her lady and kissed her with every bit of will she had to give. Sif’s mouth tasted like tears. Her lips were soft and a little wet and moving reverently against her own. It felt like the world had shifted and now she floated in space, connected to Yggdrasil by a single thread that tied around her soul and linked her to this fierce woman who kissed like she fought: hard, unyielding, and with all her heart.
Sif’s hands went to her lady’s hair and she lost her fingers in the silk tendrils. She broke the kiss to
stare into Sigyn’s eyes. “You are engaged to Thor.”

“Yes.” Sigyn whispered breathlessly, before they tilted their heads and kissed again. Their lips
created a small symphony of sounds that rejoiced in every touch. Sigyn felt lightheaded, but she
found that if she kept kissing Sif, she did not need air.

Again, Sif pulled away, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted. “Should we stop?”

Sigyn was repulsed by the very idea of stopping. She was going to make kissing Sif her life. She
would never need anything but the taste of her lips and the lines of her body pressed against her
own.

Her answer came as surely as her kisses. “Never.”

So they never ceased their passion. Their moment in that corner was an eternity filled with kisses
that had no end and no beginning. They just were. And in that eternity, that infinite series of sighs
and smiles, Sigyn thanked the stars for Sif and all that was to come of their love.

*hem* So, like I said, I didn't expect it to be so...um...like that. But that's how it went
with all the romance...and stuff. Because I really like romantic shit and I can't help but
push it into my fanfic. Because...um...that's how I roll.

Okay, per usual, with all romantic things aside (almost), I have some things I want to
say about this chapter.

Firstly, I put Sam Wilson in this chapter. I have legit been wanting to make a chapter
with him from the time I first introduced Grace. But the time wasn't right. Then he was going to be at the library with Grace that one time when she met Loki, but it still didn't fit. So, I took all of Sam out and waited until this beautiful breakfast opportunity. I sat down to start this chapter and was like "It's time."

Sam in the comics is different from the Sam in the movies, I tried to represent a bit of each in this chapter since we didn't get a lot about Sam's background in the movies. In the comics, his dad was a preacher and he was killed trying to settle a fight. Sam then went and got involved in crime and California (I think) and then HYDRA shit happens.

Next, literature.

I really like literature. I read a lot of old words written by dead people. It makes me happy. You know what else makes me happy? Alluding to different books and authors in order to make statements about the different characters in my fic. I know, what a dorky thing to do. I'm just going to make this a bit clear about those allusions because I think they're important: Tyr likes the western culture romantic era novels and poetry because those focus on the feelings that people have and it's nice for him to read something he can relate to. Loki likes romantic era poetry because, once again, feelings, but also because he is (or he will be in the future) arrogant, anti-social, dark, very romantic, and shows compassion for one singular person *hem* Darcy. (Note: exception for Frigga because she's Frigga.) Darcy mentions that she likes Li Baojio, who was a realist author as a opposed to a romantic one. (a bit later, like the early 20th century/late 19th c). The chinese didn't really have a romantic era I don't think. He was a classical literature revival type author and, admittedly I read only one book by him, but it was very political and it reflected a lot of the happenings at that time. Point is, Darcy isn't as interested in romance for the time being. And now I've written you a short novel on literature, Please excuse me while I move onto the next explanation in shame.

I don't know how most people feel about OC's. Under normal circumstances, I like to limit my OC's and only have a few unimportant ones. I'm breaking my own standards here by giving all of my OC's lives and histories. I promise you, I'm not just doing that to give myself feelings. Their lives all have a purpose. Tyr will play a greater role later on and his past is kinda important for it I suppose.

I think that's it for now! Thank you for reading and stuff! You guys are the best and I love you bunches! Feel free to drop a comment and tell me what you think, because I do like it when people think things. ;P
Darcy glanced up from her notes as Loki stirred in his sleep.

Upstate New York was suffering from an early summer thunderstorm, the loud crashes of lightning sounded through the night causing Loki to be restless. Darcy didn’t think he was scared of thunder per say, but the noise bothered him along with the fact that it was a reminder of Thor and his mighty power of the storm that seemingly unmatched his own abilities.

She quirked a grin, standing from her spot on the floor to pull up the sheet that he had kicked away. He always did that. Darcy would wake up shivering because Loki had gathered all the sheets at the foot of the bed. Frank and Fenrir only made it worse as they often chased each other around in their dreams, rolling over Darcy and Loki like super heavy, overgrown tumbleweeds.

Frowning, Darcy watched Loki’s sleeping face, gently pushing a lock of black hair behind his ear.

Life had been hard for them the past few months.

It seemed for a while after they returned from their trip to Thryheim that Darcy’s anxiety had calmed down. She remembered sleeping so well their last night in Tyr’s home that Loki had to
wake her up in the morning. Her mental health kept on improving through December and at the turn of the Midgardian year she felt the constant compress on her heart had lifted.

Then there was the trip to Skornheim.

Whenever a new law or decree was made in the capital it was customary for the royals to deliver the message to the people personally. They would travel to the different provinces to announce said declaration and then celebrate with festivities put on by the province. Loki and Thor were to speak in Skornheim of the recent developments of a special project erected by the Allfather’s small council. The group consisted of four members: the treasurer, the secretary, First Warrior of the Einherjar, and the Allfather. Sometime before winter, they made a decree to publicize sorcery in the lower class.

Originally it had been Darcy’s idea. She petitioned the Allfather for at least two seasons before he even bothered to read her research reports and finally, after enough pestering on her part, Odin made up his mind to test her theories in the capital. There was protest to the project from a select group of nonprogressive peoples, but so many reveled in having recognition for their magical accomplishments that production of enchantments and speed of artifact study increased by sixty percent.

Asgard had a shortage of sorceresses.

Lower class females made up most of the sorcery in the realm. They supported ingenuity and eternal-cultured magic styles. Because they were the main practitioners of magic, public organizations were paid for by the crown to fashion new weapons, advance Asgardian magic, expand on theories and methods for creation. Particularly astute sorceresses were given the Aesir version of grants to take a few years at a time to work on specific projects.

The problem was that none of this was publicized. No one knew about the sorceresses and the wonders of magic. Few pursued the field even though the demand for magic was high.

Darcy blamed Odin per usual.

He’d purposefully kept magic in the dark, degrading the art in favor of promoting warrior status. She understood why.

During the war with the Jotunns, they needed warriors more than they needed sorcery.

Odin’s dismissal of sorcery accompanied by Frigga dropping her throne in favor of a clandestine agency of spies left Asgard with an underappreciated magical community.

When Odin and his council pronounced that the publicity campaign would go through, Frigga insisted that Loki and Thor tour the provinces in order to formally present the decree. Of course Darcy would go along as well.

All had gone fine. They made their way through all of the provinces, conversing with lords and noblewomen, laughing with commoners and drinking with bards and musicians. It was a wonderful time. Darcy was humored by the men that tried to flirt with her. She found herself accepting more dances just for fun. She decided in Ringsfjord, after having the son of a noble trip over her feet, that if she ever did date anyone, she wanted them to be a fantastic dancer.

Loki also had a good time. He and Darcy never danced together, but as a Prince, Loki did his fair share of flirting with unsuspecting ladies. Darcy wasn’t sure if he knew he was flirting or he was just busy being himself. Either way, people liked him, even if he tended to revert to being an
intolerant ass when discussing politics. He had no patience for debate and Darcy tried to guide him away from political talks in order to keep his public image in decent condition.

Loki never had any trouble speaking to an audience. In fact, Darcy believed he liked the attention. He was good at explaining things. He spoke formally, intelligently, and with a large yet understandable vocabulary. However, he was also a cocky little shit when he wanted to be. Darcy had to be careful as to how to create his public image.

She wouldn’t ask Loki to change his personality towards the public; they deserved to know who was ruling them. But she had to make him likable. He was admired by the people as a focused royal who leveled with his people through his studies in sorcery. They saw him as serious as a dry humored progressive and convincing debater. Darcy had built Loki’s image to be different, as Loki was very different from any royal yet to live, but she did so in such a mysterious and positive way that not one political article had anything bad to say about Prince Loki.

All in all, Darcy was pretty damn good at her job. She had connections all over Asgard, many of which she used to promote her causes. Whenever Loki went to meet with someone, she was typically by his side, her hand nestled in the crook of his elbow. They often spoke together, Darcy beginning a statement and Loki adding onto it as she went, saying especially annoying or comical things. His playful humor went a long way to draw in the favor of noticeable figures from across the realm.

Needless to say, by the time Darcy, Loki and Thor got to Skornheim, the second prince and his advisor had the favor of over half of Asgard.

Darcy stood through Loki’s speech on Skornheim smiling to herself thinking about how that night would go: dancing, food, moderate drinking and falling into Loki’s bed exhausted.

It was that moment before the people of Skornheim - that second of absolute complacency - that Darcy blamed for the horrible events that ensued toward the end of Loki’s silvertongued discourse.

In the middle of thanking Skornheim for its hospitality, he stopped speaking. Darcy watched him, confused, as she felt the tingly sensation of his magic wash over the platform at which they stood in the center of High Lord Hardvaar’s courtyard.

Suddenly, he turned on his toe to face the balcony behind them just in time for a gold tipped arrow to imbed itself in his shoulder. If he hadn’t moved, the projectile would have shot through his heart.

Darcy’s world fell to pieces in less than a second. Her knees went weak as she made her way to Loki’s side, instantaneously giving commands to the Einherjar that had accompanied them throughout their tour. Her voice was shaky and her insides were trembling, but her words were strong. She instructed them to arrest the assassin and to keep him alive.

Let it be known that Darcy Lewis was ready to tear apart anyone who dared to take Loki’s life.

After her directions had been given she melted, pouring over Loki in frantic distress. He dislodged the arrow from his shoulder and healed the wound in no time, but the sight of his blood dripping from the golden tip made her sick. She began babbling incoherently at her friend, trying in vain to make sure he was still alive and his recovery was not a figment of her imagination.

She couldn’t breathe. A heavy weight settled over her heart putting a damper on her lungs. She gasped for air, touching all of Loki she could just to make sure he was still there.
She didn’t think about the audience of Skorns watching her mental state collapse or Thor presenting to her the assassin that had tried to kill her prince. She didn’t think about anything but Loki and how he had almost been gone from her. She could count on her fingers the number of times they had almost died.

But those were times when they almost died together and on life threatening adventures. This assassination happened in a protected environment. It occurred to Darcy that Loki could be gone from her at any moment. There were so many forces that could take him and she was only a mortal.

Loki had gently pulled her to his side murmuring some quiet condolence against her temple, but it was no use. She couldn’t breathe the air around her unless it carried his scent and the only sight that wasn’t obscured by fear was his face. With manner of nonchalance, Loki thanked everyone for their patience and told them to enjoy the festivities.

He led her away to her chambers where the return of her tireless anxiety came with a vengeance.

Wrapped up in a blanket and quivering with shock, Darcy sat in Loki’s lap by the fire, her head resting on his shoulder while he held her legs and kissed her face. She undid the front straps of his armor so she could feel the shoulder that had been impaled by the golden shafted arrow, running her fingers over the smooth healed skin.

They stayed like that for hours until she could speak properly again. Darcy wanted to interrogate the assassin but Loki suggested that they wait until morning. He’d given Thor brief instruction on entertaining guests and asked that the would-be murderer be kept in Skornheim’s dungeons.

Darcy was so worn out and anxious that she agreed and Loki held her through the night. Neither of them slept, choosing to converse in soft whispers about things that had nothing to do with politics or family. Loki magically projected himself onto her, explaining secrets of the universe he’d discovered simply by watching the stars. Darcy didn’t know how much was theory or if he had actual proof. But his words were so beautiful that Darcy could listen to them forever.

By the time morning came, Darcy could have sworn her entire being had been put through a wringer. Loki returned to his rooms just before handmaidens arrived to help Darcy dress for the day. She didn’t really need their help, but they did a much better job at styling her hair and covering up the dark circles under her eyes.

Darcy dressed for war. The sniveling wreck who lost her wits at the very sight of her friend’s blood was gone. She was Advisor Darcy and she was prepared to do whatever necessary to ensure that no assassin ever came anywhere near her prince ever again. She would deal with the public’s reaction to her open affection for Loki later. An attempt on Loki’s life could not be passed off as simply an angry citizen attacking royalty. Especially with the impending war with Vanaheim that Darcy was no closer to figuring out than she’d been a few months ago.

No. There must’ve been something more to the assault than some peasant’s suicide mission. Attempting assassination of a royal was to risk one’s life.

Loki must have fallen asleep when he returned to his rooms and Darcy ordered the staff not to wake him.

With her shoulders back and head held high, she made her way to the dungeons flanked by two of the Einherjar. Her swords were strapped to her waist over her dress and the light silver of her armored breastplate and wrist guards contrasted drastically in the dank light of the underground chambers.
She didn’t care how tired she looked, she was getting answers and she was getting them directly.

Or so she thought. The cell was unlocked, the solid door swinging open to expose the fresh corpse of her new obsession.

Darcy could not recall ever being so livid. Red clouded her vision and she personally saw that the body was wrapped and taken back to the capital.

Without even asking permission she began a realm-wide covert investigation. She examined the body personally, having to reference a collection of forensic books she’d read a few years earlier. She questioned guards and noblemen, cooks and peasants. She walked the halls of Skornheim over and over again and she analyzed every aspect of the bow and arrow that would have taken Loki’s life had he not been as astute at magic.

Much to her utter devastation, what she found was hardly of substance. The ‘assassin’ was a common farmer named Gorif Jurgnelson with no children, no spouse and very little money. He was a hunter and good with a bow. He died from orally consumed poison commonly used to eradicate vermin from any given area. All the guards were clean along with Skornheim’s citizens.

Any normal person would have said that Gorif Jurgnelson was just a disgruntled man with nothing to lose. Even Loki, who had assisted in the investigation at Darcy’s persistence, claimed that Gorif’s motive was likely only bitterness towards the throne. Darcy would have been tempted to agree if it were not for the arrow.

The golden arrow.

It was crafted from a compound of gold and a type of Asgardian steel that was refined by crushing gemstones into the metal while it was hot. The method was perfected by Baldur, Asgard’s most renowned blacksmith, a few thousand years ago and the metal soon become one of the most desired substances in all the nine realms. It was extremely difficult to craft and the only one capable of such a feat was Baldur himself.

Darcy spoke with him about the compound as well as the arrow. He called the material “Valkyrie Hide” because it was strong and gleamed like the skin of gods. When he first began making weapons with the metal, which he admitted he had not oft been inclined to do, he created twelve arrows belonging to a single quiver. The arrows were scattered and he assumed they had been lost in the war. The smith told her grimly that he had not crafted any such substance in the past few millennia. When Darcy presented him with the weapon of Gorif Jurgnelson, Baldur’s heavy brows lifted in amazement.

Darcy was onto something. She didn’t know if it had to do with Lord Bjarte and the Norns, the Vanir, angry peasants, or a vicious cult lurking in the pits of Asgardian society, but she was going to find out.

From that fateful day on Skornheim onward, Darcy felt like the world was crushing her. Her breaths were shallow and her throat was always thick. She couldn’t bring herself to eat anymore than a few bites per meal because her stomach refused to settle. Sleep was impossible. Every time she closed her eyes the dwelling sensation of dread seeped into every crevice of her soul until she was forced into a wicked bout of repressed shivers and groans of pain. If she did manage to sleep she was haunted by nightmares more vile than ever before.

She was suffering and she couldn’t stop it. Loki was worried about her, but she refrained from telling him about her suffocating anguish. In part, she felt ashamed that one incident would cause her to react so severely. Darcy figured that if she could just ensure Asgard and Loki’s safety as well
as solving the Vanahelm-War puzzle then everything would be fine. The worst would be over and she could sleep without seeing all of her worst fears swimming in bleak darkness.

Loki was so much to her. Calling him her friend was an understatement. He was the best thing to ever happen to her and the one person she couldn’t lose. She had to find the power to keep him alive. She would resolve the fantastical mystery that was soon becoming her life.

Darcy sighed, lightly squeezing Loki’s hand that was grasping her pillow.

A bright flash of lightning lit the room and a few seconds later a rumble of thunder sounded through the walls. Loki shot up like he’d been struck. His sudden movement caused Fenrir to turn in his sleep which ultimately led to Frank slithering about for a few seconds until they were comfortably wrapped around one another.

Loki was breathing heavily, his eyes clenched shut and his hair was a mess. Darcy scooted closer to him, secretly hoping that he was up for the day. It was six thirty and she wanted to talk, preferably while he held her. She had been needy lately, so much that she was verging on being clingy. But when she was tormented everyday by thoughts of him dying and the Nine Realms falling to ruin after she failed to locate all six infinity stones and win the war with Vanahelm.

With a tired yawn, Loki pulled her to him and she didn’t hesitate to snuggle as close as possible, putting herself in his lap and burying her face in his neck as he leaned against the headboard.

They sat in comfortable silence listening to the rain crash against the roof. Loki ran his fingers idly through her hair while she played with his collar.

Finally Loki broke the silence, his hand slipping down to rub heat into her cold arm. “Did you sleep last night?” his voice was soft and quiet, matching the air in the slowly lightening room.

A bitter taste wet her mouth as she lied to him. “Some.”

She could feel Loki’s grimace at her vague and slightly untrue response. He moved his head, looking to the mess of notes and journals spread around the floor. “Darcy?”

She replied timidly, concerned that he might be mad. “Yeah?”

“Are those my notes?” he asked, lips brushing the top of her head.

Darcy picked up his hand, fidgeting with his fingers. She may or may not have picked apart his notes last night.

Her world was falling apart and she had very few solutions to a great many problems. Wherever she looked, more kept popping up.

Take last night for instance, when she was searching through Loki’s notes for magical reference to include in her report to Odin about the advance in magical studies over the past season when she happened upon one of his research journals. Loki was constantly in the habit of taking notes even if he didn’t need to. He did it for her because she liked to keep up with his many magical experiments.

This journal was focused on speed. Pages and pages of slanted green writing depicted theories on what one must do to penetrate the spatial barrier between the Nine Realms and the Galaxy Beyond. Somewhere in the middle of the book, amongst a series of equations, he found a way.

It still amazed Darcy, even though she had known him so long, that Loki could be as clever as he
was and still underestimate himself. When he spent days working on a project, he never did it for the realm, money, fame or power. He did it for science; because Loki liked to know how far into the universe he could get without causing Ragnarok. And on occasion, he did some of it for her, just to make her happy.

But the way out of the galaxy was impressively done. It wasn’t a portal. Not really. In his conclusion he stated that ‘speed, when increased to the point where it tests infinite potential, will form a lapse in the space between Yggdrasil and the Galaxy, allowing for the object(s) generating the speed to pass through’.

She read through all of his notes, checked over his flawless calculations and scowled at his methods for collecting data (i.e. jumping out of longships from great heights). According to Loki, they could use a longship to get out of Yggdrasil if they gained enough speed to pierce the Asgardian atmosphere without drifting into space.

“Maybe,” Darcy mumbled tiredly, shifting to go put away the mess she made.

Loki held onto her, halting her retreat by keeping her securely in his embrace. “Leave it for now. Tell me what you think.”

She gave him a halfhearted smile, leaning her head back on his shoulder and lifting her chin so she could look him in the eyes. “I think your hair is messy.”

“I would be willing to wager that it is,” he smirked, taking advantage of his position behind her to wiggle his fingers over her ribs effectively spurring a series of breathless giggles from her tired lips. She elbowed him in the stomach a few times before he stopped, snuggling back under the sheets and playfully tugging her with him.

Another rumble of thunder reverberated through the room and Darcy hugged Loki just a bit tighter as he ran his fingers down her arm. Closing her eyes, she inhaled his scent, trying to staunch the worrisome thick feeling in her chest. She didn’t know how to stop it; so she just let Loki hold her and hoped that it would go away.

“Darcy?” Loki asked quietly, pulling the covers up around their shoulders. She hadn’t realized how cold it was in her room until the heat of their bodies was trapped under her purple quilted bedspread.

It was almost difficult to respond because of how tight her throat felt. “Loki.”

He took a long second to ask his question, twisting a few strands of her hair. “What is wrong?”

Her heart was reminding her insistently of its presence in her chest as she thought about the prospects of telling Loki of her unreasonable fears.

It wasn’t the first time he’d asked her if she was okay or if there was something wrong and she was constantly catching him staring at her like she was going to collapse at any minute. She felt awful for keeping him in the dark with no explanation to her aching want for closeness and endless need of distraction. But she didn’t know what to tell him. What could she say?

That she was scared he was going to get assassinated? That the Nine Realms were going to fall into nothingness unless she did something? That she was worried for the sake of worry and she couldn’t solve any of the problems that were set before her?

He would think she was crazy or tell her that she was being stupid. She knew she was just being petty about the whole thing. She should be able to do these things…she just couldn’t.
“I’m only thinking,” Darcy said, clearing her throat to dispel some of the tension there.

Loki was silent for a moment before he slipped a finger under her chin, tentatively asking that she look at him. She complied almost shamefully. Green met blue, seeking out the truth she was unwilling to give.

As a person, Loki was a bit different than most when it came to pulling off the impossible. He was nonstop in his endeavors and Darcy knew from watching him work that it was because he never really felt accomplished. It was part of why he undermined his discoveries and intelligence. She always figured it had something to do with his need to equate with Thor.

From what she’d learned of Loki’s past, he was a really sick kid and he couldn’t go fight like his older brother. He had no interest in warring and battle. He liked his mother and magic and reading. But in the war cultured society his father had created, Loki’s small achievements like mastering a new spell or finishing a particularly detailed tome were overlooked and even laughed at because Loki was a boy studying a woman’s art.

It broke Darcy’s heart to think that because of this, Loki never really considered that he’d accomplished anything. Every task he completed was seen as only a step to something greater.

With this insatiability also came impatience. Loki had no tolerance in discussing magic with anyone who couldn’t keep speed with him academically and he hardly bothered to be anything but cocky to anyone who spoke with him lest it be Darcy or Frigga. It was fairly entertaining to listen to Loki’s witty, sarcastic one-liners get the best of people, but the contrast between his reluctant forbearance to society and his leniency to her was vast.

Loki wanted to listen to her; he cared about what she said and how she felt. He liked to know things, but he had the patience to wait for her to tell him.

Darcy wondered now, looking into his eyes, how long that patience would last.

His brows came together, one of them cocked just a bit higher than the other. It was the Loki version of the sad puppy dog look. It had the unavoidable power to bend her will no matter the circumstances. Sometimes he did it on purpose and other times it was completely involuntary.

“What are you thinking about?”

Rain beat against the window and another clash of thunder made Darcy flinch. That was another effect of the stress; it made her jumpy as Hel. She smiled weakly at him, looking back to all she’d done last night. “I’m thinking about when you were going to tell me that you found a way out of Yggdrasil along with the possible location of another infinity stone.”

Loki pursed his lips, turning his gaze upwards to study the ceiling. “I do not know if it is safe or if it will even be successful.”

“Oh,” she said lamely. She hadn’t gotten that from his notes, but she knew Loki well enough to know that if he said something wasn’t safe, they’d best not do it.

They were silent for a few moments, Darcy focusing on Loki’s heart and trying to match her own frenetic beat to his.

“When do you leave for Culver?” Loki asked, his hushed voice melding in perfectly with the sound of the pouring rain.

Darcy bit her cheek, wondering how he might take the truth.
During the late winter seasons, Darcy had sent in an application and an essay to Culver for a special summer long program they were offering to ten students from around the world. If chosen, said students would go to Culver University at the beginning of summer and study under a few of Culver’s most esteemed professors. They would stay in dorms, speak with Culver students, and attend seminars for their intended major.

Surprisingly, Darcy had gotten in. Her essay on the abolishment of political labels must have been a success because she even won a scholarship for merit.

But now that summer was here, she had decided to cancel her trip. Her mother told her to think about it before she was to leave in two days time.

“I don’t think I’m going. Too busy,” Darcy managed as a flash of lightning lit the room for a bare second. They waited for the sound of thunder, its low rumble shook Darcy’s every nerve and she moved to get out of bed. She had to work on something…anything.

She sat up, swinging her legs out from under the covers and trying to breathe evenly. What if she never changed anything for the better? What if she never made a difference? What if Loki got assassinated and because she couldn’t figure out who that damned arrow belonged to?

Her heart was skipping beats and the t-shirt she wore to bed during the spring and summer months seemed too thin. Suddenly, Loki’s arms were winding around her, one of his palms pressing into her chest right where the tension was the thickest, right over her heart.

“Darcy,” he said against her hair, his thumb rubbing smooth circles over her collarbone. “Darcy, you are ill.”

She shook her head frantically. She wasn’t sick. She just needed to find a way to deal with everything that was going on and she would be all right. Inhaling deeply through the nose, she answered him on her exhale. “Loki, I’m fine. Relax.”

His thumb stopped its gentle path and she felt him shake his head. “Please do not lie to me, Darcy. I am not the one who needs to relax.”

Outside the loud ring of a storm alert howled through the skies and Darcy shot up at its shrill cry. “Let’s go anyways,” she spewed out in a hurried voice. Usually she wasn’t so frenetic, but today she felt like she was going to snap in two unless she did something. “Let’s go out of Yggdrasil,” she said, turning to Loki who still sat on the edge of the bed with his tousled black hair and expressive eyes.

He looked her up and down, with a worried look that was growing aggression in its wake. “No.”

Darcy halted in collecting the notes from the floor and organizing them again, flicking her gaze to him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Loki began, his voice the tiniest bit strict as he snapped his fingers and made all of the loose papers and cluttered journals on the floor disappear, “I don’t think it would be a responsible decision for us to go on any adventures right now.”

She smirked at him, snorting satirically. “Oh yeah, I forgot. Loki Odinson, Prince of Mischief, Chaos, and Lies and responsibility.” She stepped towards her chest of drawers, finding a pair of fuzzy socks in the depths and sitting down to put them on.

“Darcy, I am being quite serious,” he said, his tone verging on frustration as a clap of thunder struck loud enough to make Frank and Fenrir squirm.
Darcy flinched again, standing up and striding to her window, yanking the drapes shut with ferocity and effectively entrapping them in the darkness. “I’m serious too, Lokes,” she whispered, stumbling to find her way back to him. “We should go.”

Frigga wanted the stones found. If they could just get down to finding them, then perhaps one of Darcy’s puzzles would be solved.

But there were other reasons Darcy wanted to find the stones. It made no sense to Darcy how such powerful objects could be so unknown to the Nine Realms. Surely someone would have found a stone and discovered its potential. She refused to believe that there was not some being out in the forever expanding universe that had not also gone searching for the infinity stones.

The idea was intriguing, yet terrifying. Darcy knew, or at least had an idea, of the stones’ capabilities. And she spent enough time around power hungry people to understand that not everyone who found those stones would only want them for study. They were dangerous and she felt rushed to find them all before anyone else.

Loki’s arms found her again, holding her steady as she began to make out his features in the dark. Lightning flared outside, a streak of light slipping in from the crease in her drapes, illuminating the sharp planes of Loki’s face that cast shadows over his cheeks. The intensity of his expression and the otherworldly green of his eyes struck her speechless. This was the dreadful moment she’d foreseen where Loki reached his breaking point.

“Darcy,” he pronounced her name with a sincerity that could never be ignored as he cradled her cheeks in his palms. “I want you to go see Eir. Or a Midgardian doctor if you must.”

Feigning nonchalance, she offered him a quick smile, lightly grasping his wrists in attempt to escape his pained face. “Loki, I’m okay you big worry-wart.”

Despite Darcy’s efforts, he did not relinquish his hold on her, his thumb and forefinger slipping down to grasp her chin. Not forcefully, but with just enough power to make her meet his gaze. Guilt radiated from her scalp to her toes as he spoke. “You misunderstand Darcy. I am past the point of worrying. I was worried when you began taking extra work. I was worried when you replaced your breakfast with coffee. I was worried when you spent your nights tossing and turning in distress.”

He paused for a moment, his long fingers pushing her hair behind her ears and tracing her temples like he wanted to see into her mind. But he wouldn’t do that; she knew he wouldn’t.

“I am not worried anymore,” he clarified, “I am desperate, Darcy. I feel you falling and I have no idea how to catch you.”

Her bottom lip trembled and she willed herself not to cry. She hadn’t cried yet and she wasn’t going to. “Loki…” she fought for the right words to say around the growing strain in her chest. “I’m just a bit stressed… I guess. You know how it is.”

His features hardened and he took a step back. Darcy felt very much alone without his immediate presence. “No, I do not know how it is. I do not know how to help you except to hold you and hope that whatever pains you disappears.” He looked away from her, studying the world map that hung on her one wall that was not overtaken by books. “But it is not enough.”

Darcy shook her head, trying to find the words to reassure him that it wasn’t his fault. “No. No, Loki, please don’t say that. I’m not… we can’t… I’m all right.”
He turned towards her again, all princely composure broken and livid venom seeping into his tone. “And how am I supposed to believe that when you won’t even tell me what’s wrong?”

It wasn’t a shout. Loki hardly ever raised his voice. His words were soft yet they cut deeper than if he had screamed vile contempt in her face.

That did it for Darcy. She sniffed once, stammering out a few jumbled words before the tears started streaming down her face. And through their watery wake, she saw Loki melt.

He hugged her, stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head, apologizing over and over again. Each time he did, it made her cry even harder.

“Forgive me, Darling,” he whispered, holding her to his chest as she hugged him tightly, fearing the moment she had to let go.

They stood there, holding one another and listening as the storm outside quieted. The time between the flashes of lightening and muted claps of thunder was increasing as the rate of Darcy’s heart slowed.

Eventually, her sobs died down enough that she could speak.

“Loki,” she sniffed, thinking hard about how to relay the truth of her feelings to him.

Pulling away only slightly, Loki looked down at her. “Do not, Darcy,” he pleaded, wiping away a stray tear. “Please do not feel as though you owe me an explanation. What I said…I was being selfish. I only want you to feel better.”

She swallowed hard, forcing back another wave of tears. This was her way out. Loki was reminding her that she didn’t have to tell him anything. He was always her support. But Darcy had already made up her mind. Loki was so important to her and she to him, it seemed unfair that she would let this anxious downfall hurt him as it did her.

“It’s okay,” Darcy said, bringing her hand to Loki’s face and running her fingers over his thin lips. “I’m scared, Loki.”

They turned into a frown and his breath tickled her fingers with his reply. “What scares you, Darcy?”

She bit her lip, contemplating how to phrase the vast answer to that question. “So much.”

After a few more hesitant remarks from the both of them, Darcy began to tell him about everything she’d neglected to say over the past few months: her anxiety over his safety, Asgard’s potential collapse, her failure to do anything of true value. She even elaborated on some of the inexplicable feelings of dread that caused her heart to race and her breaths to become short. She told him all that she could and he listened the entire time, moving them to her bed and wrapping a blanket around their shoulders.

When Darcy finally got to the end of the torturous account of her feelings, she searched his carefully composed face for a sign that he wasn’t disappointed in her. She cleared her throat just to fill the silence. “Don’t be mad.”

Slowly, his expressionless demeanor faded in the presence of a sad smile. “Why would I be angry, Darcy? If anything, you should be angry with me for not saying something before I did.”

“Don’t be stupid, they were closet emotions. They only just came out,” she joked lamely and Loki
gave her a pointed glare.

It felt good to tell him. She felt less guilty and talking it out…it helped. But the idea of going back to Asgard and going about her duties brought on a whole new bout of anxious nerves.

Loki scrutinized her every inch, taking in her messy hair, her oversized t-shirt and purple pajama shorts, her small hands and bright blue eyes. “Go on your trip to Culver, Darcy. You worked hard for it, you should see it through.”

“Loki, it’s a summer long program,” Darcy reasoned, taking one of his hands and linking their fingers. “I don’t really have the time to go.”

His jaw clenched and he looked like he was preparing for a resurrection of the storm that had just begun to pass. “Consider it an extended holiday.”

It took a few seconds for the pieces to click in Darcy’s mind, but when they did, she started to protest.

“You’re firing me?” she managed in a high pitched voice, letting go of his hand,

Loki’s gaze turned princely as she stood up and paced the floor. “No. I am simply relieving you of your duties for the summer.”

“You’re firing me,” Darcy confirmed, irritation settling in alongside betrayal. Loki wanted to send her away? He wanted her to go? She couldn’t help Asgard is she was at Culver. What if Loki got assassinated in the weeks of her absence?

“Just for the summer.” He sighed in frustration, rubbing his brow. “What would you do if you were in my position, Darcy? I know how important your duties are and I know how dedicated you are to them.” He stood up, grasping her upper arms in earnest. “I love you, Darcy, and seeing you in such a state is excruciating, especially when I see no way to help you. If I can’t, maybe some time away could.”

Darcy gaped at him, not even trying to hide her disbelief. She felt too many things: fear of leaving him, betrayal at his intended abandonment, sadness, anger, shock…all of it was hitting her full in the face.

“So that’s just it then?” she said bluntly, turning away from him. “You can’t decide what’s best for me and what I do with my life!”

“I cannot stop you from doing what you like,” Loki snapped bitterly, “but I can limit your opportunities if I think it is best.”

Enraged, Darcy whipped around. “You cannot! Last I checked I was still a leading political figure of the Asgardian court!”

Loki reflected her anger, meeting her challenge with a growl, “I can because last I checked I was still your friend and your prince.”

His remark stung and Darcy, with her ever present impulsive tendencies, said the first spiteful thing that came to mind. “Check again, your highness.”

It was clear her retort had shocked them both, but Darcy was too emotionally worn to take it back and she bitterly stormed from her room, slamming the door behind her.
She stood outside her bedroom, shaking with more emotions than she had sense. When they began to recede, she cursed herself, opening the door again to apologize. She hadn’t meant it. She really hadn’t. But by the time she re-entered, Loki was gone along with Frank and Fenrir. The rain had finally stopped.

***

Loki spent the next week after his and Darcy’s fight being a complete wreck.

He abandoned all his duties, ignored anyone who spoke to him, and chose to brood in especially excluded areas outside the palace with Jörmungandr and Fenrir running worried circles around him.

Grief sat on his tongue, the last words of their argument adding to the sour aftertaste of his hunger for her company. He’d gone back to Darcy’s room on day two of their time apart, but when he arrived all that awaited him was a letter written in purple pen. It was a heartfelt apology from the only person he ever really cared to see again save his mother.

Darcy’s note told him that she had gone to Culver and that he was right; she needed to go figure out how to manage her stress. She told him she loved him and there was a small smudge of ink on the ‘L’ of his name where one of her tears had fallen.

It was the saddest thing he’d ever read. He should know, for he’d read it a thousand times. It made the empty feeling in his heart bigger every time he recited the precious verse of her farewell. He distracted himself with other reading materials, but the words of even his favorite texts turned into her note.

Darcy Lewis was in every line he read, every color he saw and every step he took. He didn’t want to be away from her any longer.

But he also wanted to wake up while she was fast asleep beside him. He wanted to hear her laugh without him having to tickle her. He wanted to see her smile, not some rundown mockery of its true glory. He wanted to sit with her and do absolutely nothing but watch the sky while she ran her fingers through his hair and teased him about being a little shit.

Perhaps he wanted too much.

On the eighth day of his self-sentenced isolation, Thor found him in one of the smallest collegiums, sitting in a window with a book he wasn’t even bothering to read propped open in his lap.

“Brother, you are harder to find than scraps after a feast with Volstagg.”

Loki would have been surprised if he could have mustered the energy, most of it was being spent on mourning the potential loss of his and Darcy’s friendship. “Yet here we are.”

Thor rolled his eyes and approached his brother exasperatedly, dropping Mjolnir to the floor, the stone tile beneath it cracking. “Come now, there must be a reason that you’ve been subject to the wiles of solitude, for surely it is not as pleasurable as you deem it to be.”

Scowling, Loki snapped his book shut. “I am simply expending my rights as a prince.”

“By avoiding your duties? It is unlike you,” Thor said and Loki nearly pushed him out the window for choosing now to show fraternal care. When he didn’t respond, Thor continued with a knowing smirk. “Is it Darcy?”
“No,” Loki answered quicker than he should have and Thor gave him a triumphant grin.

“It is Darcy. She has left you,” Thor persisted, rejoicing when Loki squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall against the stone sill he sat in.

Fenrir wagged his tail and made a sound reminiscent of a hiss at Thor’s arrival. “Oh, and you took the children as well. I am beginning to see why you insist on being alone.”

Fed up, Loki tossed his book aside. “Is there something you wanted other than to intrude on my privacy?”

Thor held up his hands in sincere apology. “Loki, I jest. I only found it amusing that we should both be tormented by women for two entirely different reasons.”

It was Loki’s turn to roll his eyes as he swung himself from the sill, landing easily on the balls of his feet and safely stowing Darcy’s note in his armor. “Darcy has not left me.”

“No?” Thor challenged teasingly.

“No,” Loki confirmed, bitterly slipping the book back onto the shelf he retrieved it from. “Moreover, we are not, nor have we ever been, together despite popular belief.”

Thor’s blonde brows hit his hairline and Loki noticed that his brother was wearing more casual attire. His armor was gone, replaced by a tunic and pants. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Loki repeated tartly, examining a shelf of books with a keen eye. He’d read them all, that or he believed them to be drivel and the author had no idea what they were writing of. “She is taking the summer for herself and if all goes well, I should see her again next season.”

Thor crossed his muscled arms, giving his brother a humored expression. “Ah, I understand.”

“Good.”

“She left you in favor of solitude and now you are embittered and punishing yourself with the same treatment,” he said, as if he’d just solved the greatest mystery Asgard had ever known.

Loki sighed, tilting his head back and offering his pained expression to the tall, vaulted ceiling of the collegium. “If you insist. Is there anything else you desire other than to remind me of my torment?”

“Yes,” Thor responded merrily, stepping between Loki and the books, his brilliant smile reduced to a small grin that was accentuated by the beard he was beginning to grow. Loki had facial hair at one point as well, but it was miserable and he hated it. Also, Jörmungandr detested it, so he chose to cast it away. It would now only grow in if he wished it to. “I wish for your company. We have spent little time together these past few years and, admittedly due to my own faults, a great many before that. We are almost adults, Loki. We should enjoy life.”

Loki grimaced at what his brother could possibly mean by ‘enjoying life’. Although, he was right about a couple things. They hadn’t spent much time together and they were almost adults. The last time they’d done anything particularly memorable was after Thor’s engagement to Sigyn.

Loki had taken them out on his longship, intending to do some of his studies in speed. The most effective method to test his theories was to magically enhance his ship and fly it at increasingly dangerous velocities near different portals in attempt to break the seal between Asgard and the Galaxy.
He never would have imagined that he and Thor would have had such a marvelous time. His brother was skeptical at first, especially after Loki sent them careening over the Derid Sea and crashed the ship into a boulder, but they leapt out in time, so it all worked out in the end. From there on out, they spent the night diving from the ship at different heights and terrains just for the risk. It became progressively more entertaining after they started drinking. However, that did result in him and Thor cracking a few ribs and spraining a few muscles.

Luckily, even drunk, Loki managed to cast decent healing spells and they continued on their merry way until Loki decided he must return to Darcy. He fixed his longship, cast sobriety spells onto both him and Thor, and then returned to his friend in Thryheim.

Darcy would murder him if she ever found out and he made Thor swear upon his life and all of Asgard that he would not tell her.

He cursed himself for thinking of her again. He would not survive the summer if he constantly allowed her to infiltrate his thoughts.

Relenting, he faced his brother and his beard. “What exactly would you classify as ‘enjoying life’?”

Thor laughed, clapping his brother’s shoulder in victory. “That’s the spirit, brother! Enough sulking over women! This summer, we’ll live like the royal bachelors we are!”

The heavy weight of dread dropped in his belly and he instantly regretted his agreement to Thor’s proposal. “Gods help me,” he muttered to himself as Thor pulled him away from his brooding sanctuary and towards the palace.

***

Darcy hated Culver the first week she was there.

It wasn’t anything to do with the spotless campus, or the gorgeous dorms, or the food, or the never-ending library. It had to do with the fact that she’d never felt more lonely in all her life.

The letter she left for Loki had been her one hope that he wouldn’t leave her for the rest of her life. The longer she spent alone in her bed at Culver, restlessly tossing and turning through the night without Loki, her beloved pets, or even a distraction from her aching loneliness, the more she thought back to her revelation with the Aether.

Control. It was all about control.

For seven sleepless nights she recited to herself over and over that she could not control everything. She told herself that she would have to trust Loki and trust the realm that had been thriving since before her race had evolved into primates. She focused on giving up her overpowering need to be involved in everything.

It hurt. Sacrificing the mindset she’d worked so hard to achieve and giving up what little control she thought she’d gained.

Loki wasn’t there, nor were Frank and Fenrir. There, in her dorm bed’s thin mattress and her own fluffy pillow that smelled of Loki’s skin, she was reminded of what she was.

Human. Darcy Lewis was only human. A human girl, with human needs, and a human lifespan could not withstand the pressure of gods.
She realized in a moment of peace, when the empty feeling of Loki’s absence subsided and for the first time in forever she felt the sweet whistle of the Sandman as he passed her bed, that she wasn’t being petty or meek by feeling anxious. She wasn’t shameful or pathetic for feeling stressed. She was just another person and people were prone to anxiety.

After several of her nightly rituals had passed, Darcy felt well enough to eat an entire plate of pancakes chased by a glass of milk and one cup of coffee. She focused on her studies, took notes at lectures and met several of her and Loki’s favorite authors.

Darcy spent a great deal of time with a girl named Sharon Carter whose dorm was just across the hall from hers. Sharon was very pretty in Darcy’s book even if she didn’t particularly like blondes. But she was very sharp and extremely athletic and the two of them could talk easily and after all of their classes and seminars were over, they went out for lunch and to go shopping.

Sharon was going into her senior year of high school and claimed that she wanted to be a part of national security to make a difference in the world like her aunt. Darcy thought that was really sweet and she told her so.

As the days went on, Darcy’s thoughts of Loki and Asgard were reduced to only short pangs of longing. She missed Loki more than anything and she often dreamed that he might suddenly show up and she could jump into his arms and he would catch her, spinning them in circles until they couldn’t see straight.

It never happened though, and although the daydreams were pleasant, Darcy found it was easier to distract herself with Sharon.

In truth, Darcy was awed by the girl. She was strong willed and a few days ago when they went on a morning run together, Darcy started to wonder if Sharon was secretly a goddess. Darcy trained with gods and she could almost keep up. Sharon would have been able to spar with Sif and hold her own, at least for a few minutes. That was more than Darcy could ever hope to achieve.

When Darcy wasn’t hanging out with her new friend or listening to different people’s perspectives on politics (so much of it was bullshit, but there were a few very intelligent speakers who had less biased things to say about the evolution of government) she was at the library, indulging in her favorite pastime. She only wished that Loki was there with her.

Fifteen days after Darcy arrived at Culver, she was sitting in the library, reading a copy of a science journal that Loki had found particularly interesting a few years back. It explained an interesting take on Gamma Radiation as depicted by Dr. Bruce Banner. Loki practically swooned over anything Banner related. But to each their own. Some people liked movie stars, other people liked scientists who accidentally create chaotic experiments.

Of course, Loki was a prince of such things, so she really shouldn’t be surprised.

As she read through the journal, she was washed with a wave of melancholy followed by a quick rinse of regret. Why did she have to say those things to him? Why couldn’t she hold her tongue?

She made an irritated sound in the back of her throat, pouting like her life depended on it.

“You okay?” asked a polite, soft voice from down the aisle.

Darcy looked over her shoulder to see the librarian, a kind faced woman with brown hair and the beginnings of smile wrinkles around her blue eyes. She smiled, approaching Darcy’s table and gesturing to the empty seat beside her. “May I?”
Not wanting to be rude, Darcy nodded. “Go ahead.”

The woman took off her glasses and pointed to the book she was reading. “Not your favorite then?”

Darcy chuckled a bit, shaking her head. “Actually, it is. But my friend…my best friend, he adores the author.”

The librarian’s brows raised to her hairline. “Really? I don’t hear that often, especially around here.”

Offering her a half-hearted shrug, Darcy closed the book. “Yeah. He’s a bit weird really. He likes it when things go kablooey.”

The librarian laughed good-naturedly, tilting her chin to glance out the window. “Well, you can tell your friend that he has good taste in scientists.” She sighed, putting her glasses back on. “Back to work then. I just noticed the book and thought I’d drop by.”

Darcy let a tiny grin tilt her lips as the librarian walked away. Quickly, she turned in her chair to say one last thing. “I’m Darcy, by the way. Darcy Lewis.”

The librarian turned around, her attractive face beaming in return. “Betty Ross. I’m librarian this summer. I’m usually at the desk if you need anything.”

As Betty Ross disappeared around the corner, Darcy smiled at the book in her lap. Maybe that summer wouldn’t be so bad after all.

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Three weeks after Darcy left for Culver, Loki was feeling better. At the very least, he was not sitting by himself in isolation pondering all that was wrong with the world. He still missed Darcy dearly, but Thor was proving to be an excellent distraction.

His brother had taken to waking him up in the morning, somehow even less gracelessly than Darcy. He would charge in to Loki’s room and shake him vigorously until he saw stars. They would go to breakfast together and then head out to the fields and train like they were fighting to the death.

Surprisingly, Loki found it fairly therapeutic. Getting beat to a pulp by Mjolnir was somehow more appealing than his own mind tearing him apart. They worked with spears and swords, hand-to-hand combat and flexibility. But for the most part, they practiced their strengths. Loki learned a long time ago that he was not capable enough to match Thor’s strength head-on. But overtime, he had become stronger. His brother’s might was no longer a terrifying thought and he found that he was satisfied with his own abilities.

Illusions were a key component in defeating Thor. If Loki were to make duplicates of himself, Thor would never know which one was truly his brother.

They trained until they couldn’t stand anymore and Loki’s muscles were begging him for a hot bath.

With this new life of combative training came an appetite unlike Loki had ever felt before. He was starving every moment of every day. Hunger was ever present and he could eat almost anything at any given point. He almost ate more than Volstagg one night in the feasting hall and Fandrall congratulated him on finally acting like a man.

Loki then congratulated him on how charming his hair looked as snakes.
Of course he didn’t actually change Fandrall’s hair to snakes, it was merely an illusion. But he shrieked all the same, so Loki didn’t feel like it made much of a difference.

In almost no time at all, Loki had to make himself new armor because of his sudden muscle growth. He still wasn’t burly like Thor, he was leaner and wiry and Loki almost liked the way it made him look. It suited him.

As much as Loki missed Darcy, he was glad Thor was there to distract him from her absence. He was only really given time to think of her as he laid in bed and longed for the soft comfort of her beside him. He always dreamt of her, be it her smile or laugh, her pouts or that look she got when he did something especially annoying.

He hoped she was faring well at Culver and pondered if she was thinking about him as he was thinking about her.

It was in the middle of his third week without her that Thor woke him up by pouring a pitcher of cold water over his head. Loki swore under his breath, willing himself to be unphased by the wet, cold sheets that clung to his skin.

“Good morning, brother!” Thor greeted, clapping Loki on his wet shoulder.

Loki glared at him, green irises gleaming through small slits. “You are a heathen and the spawn of Hel.”

“It is a family trait,” Thor said as Loki bitterly stood up, stretching out his stiff limbs that were still recovering from the night before.

Thor smirked at Loki’s bare side, acknowledging a small red mark made from Mjolnir that had yet to fade. “Feeling well today, Loki?”

“Quite. How fares you?” He replied simply, waving a hand to magic his armor on. He swiftly kicked Thor on the ankle that he’d made sure to do some damage in their last wrestling match. Thor eventually won because Loki unfortunately fainted from asphyxiation, but he made sure to give his brother a few painful reminders.

Thor visibly flinched. “All is well.” He chortled a bit as he and Loki departed to go get breakfast.

“I must admit, Loki, I have never known anyone who could fight with me for as long as you have. I underestimated you,” Thor said truthfully, and then beamed. “Even if you are still a feather in the wind.”

Loki snorted in good humor, now accustomed to his brother’s jests.

Most of his friends had been women for the longest time and Loki had learned that they were not quite so rough in their affection as men. Thor’s idea of showing that he cared about his brother came in the form of hitting him with a hammer, having his ankle broken and then laughing about the wounds later.

In Loki’s opinion it was an extremely dumb bonding technique. Even so, he enjoyed it. Using his muscles, straining himself to put forth all his power, fighting with all he had. It felt good, unrestrained, and like he belonged on Asgard just a bit more.

Loki and Thor ate breakfast, both of them ravenously devouring all they could reach. Under normal circumstances, Loki would have exercised more self-control, but it wasn’t happening that morning. Sif gave them a disgusted look, tousling Thor’s hair and fondly telling him that he was a
pig. Thor told her that he loved her as well before the warrior departed looking happier than Loki had ever seen her.

Fandrall joined them not a moment later. “So, do the two of you plan on trying to kill each other again today or are we going to make use of Thor’s few remaining bachelor years?”

The younger of the two princes nearly choked on his bread at the openness of Fandrall’s statement. He implied that Loki was going with them. He was purposefully including Loki in his and Thor’s troublesome escapades that caused the formidable betrothal between Thor and Sigyn.

His brother chuckled, took one last gulp of his cider that they often drank with their morning meals and stood up, beckoning for them to follow. “Fandrall, be at peace, you dog. Loki has been practically married for years now. We had to give him time lest he fear infidelity.”

Loki battled away his initial shock with a scowl. “Thor, need I repeat myself again? Darcy and I are not—"

“—together, nor have you ever been together,” Thor finished for him mockingly. “We know. You never fail to remind us.” They exited the palace, Thor leading them through a narrower path that was more discreet in entering the city. “And since you are not Darcy’s and I suspect you never got any farther with Sigyn than a few chaste kisses, you have yet to see Valhalla.”

Fandrall laughed, giving Loki a friendly shove. “By his own hand perhaps!”

That was another thing about having men as friends; they blatantly talked of sex more often than not. Sigyn often said witty things pertaining to sexual actions. Even Darcy made the occasional jest, but it was subtle. Fandrall and Thor were not quite so eloquent with their speech and they teased him constantly about being a virgin. Loki did not really care if he was a virgin or not. He wasn’t saving himself or any horse shit nonsense like that. He just hadn’t really been given the opportunity nor had he found anyone that he truly desired to couple with.

Sure he had needs, but they were really more annoying than anything. Nevertheless, he couldn’t honestly argue against Fandrall’s accusation.

“So, by your word, Fandrall,” Loki began pleasantly, “I am missing out on absolute paradise simply because I have yet to get my dick wet?”

And he’d also taken to using more vulgar language. It was quite liberating actually. Foul words added to all of his cocky retorts. Of course, he would not use such terms in professional settings.

Thor and Fandrall smirked at one another, turning their obvious expressions onto Loki.

“Clearly,” Fandrall said as they made a turn onto a wider stone path framed by tall, untrimmed shrubbery. “If you had, I doubt you’d be so uptight.”

“I am not uptight!” Loki protested and Thor hooted with laughter. “I’m not!” he insisted again. Thor messed his brother’s hair. “You say that now, but afterwards, you will understand.”

Loki considered arguing that he did not want to have sex. Yet, he could not deny that he was curious. The higher class turned intimacy into a secret act of self-indulging transgression. Loki wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

He suspected that they were going to a brothel which Loki had only one problem with and that was spending royal money on sexual pleasure.
Unlike many of the Midgardian horrors of prostitution, on Asgard it was an honorable middle class profession. Brothels were privately owned and the men and women were all applicants who wished for the job as their occupancy. Darcy had done a thorough investigation on all of Asgard’s whorehouses to discover any wrongdoings. But she found nothing and no Aesir ever had issue with selling one’s body if it pleased them.

Also unlike Midgardian society, Asgard’s healers kept any diseases from the realm’s citizens and preventive-contraception potions and spells were paid for by the crown. The middle and lower classes were so lax about coitus that the officials thought it better to look out for its people the best they could. And with eternal-youth a viable option for anyone Idun chooses to grant an apple, something had to be done to prevent overpopulation.

Loki decided he would allow himself this one time because he rarely spent money on anything and he didn’t plan on hiring any more prostitutes. He liked to think that in the future he would go to bed with someone who wished to lie with him for other reasons besides money.

After Loki was secure in his decision that he was going to at least try sex to see if he liked it, Thor led them to the entrance to a large, beautifully sculpted building of stone and gold. Fandrall proclaimed it to be the best in the capital, and perhaps all of Asgard. Loki did not want to think of the number of brothels Fandrall would have had to visit to know that this one was superior.

They entered and before Loki knew it, he was standing alone in a room with a wide circular bed shrouded with deep colored sheets and patterned cushions. There were two tall windows with long, billowing drapes that flitted in the wind.

As far as rooms went, it was a decent one.

But as Loki stood there, waiting for his paid bedmate to arrive, he began to feel unsure of himself. He’d never been to bed with a woman before. He’d never been to bed with anyone before, unless Darcy counted. But she didn’t; he never had sex with Darcy. He was quite sure he’d have remembered that.

Obviously he understood the basic principles that applied and evidently such act was intended to be pleasurable. But Loki had not the slightest idea how to make it so. Had he ever thought about it before? Vaguely. It wasn’t something that frequently occupied his mind.

Perhaps he should ask Darcy. She was a woman.

He shook the thought from his head. What was he thinking? Darcy hadn’t had sex.

Not any that he knew of at least.

Besides, he remembered explaining sex to Darcy, and she was repulsed. She hadn’t had sex. She was on Midgard having an enchanting time without him and she would never know that he had stepped foot in a brothel of any sort.

He must learn to reach the end goal of coupling that was not intended for procreation. He must bring both parties participating in intercourse to climax. Yes. That is what he read in that book all those years ago that he never bothered to pick up again. It was naught but a book that explained the anatomies and the general process.

Hurriedly, he tried to recall all that he knew so that he would not make a fool of himself. Or any more of a fool than he had to be.
Before he could come up with a conclusion as to how he might succeed at intercourse, the polished door to the room swung open to reveal the woman who would be Loki’s first.

She was lovely, Loki supposed. She was blonde with blue eyes and a thin frame. Her dress was thin and pink and it made her skin glow. Loki also noticed that she seemed younger in demeanor, perhaps eighteen or nineteen in Midgardian years. Of course one never truly knew how old any Aesir was unless they asked.

She smiled coyly at Loki, stepping inside the room and letting the door shut behind her. “Your highness.” She bowed slightly and an unpleasant taste filled Loki’s mouth. The last time anyone had referred to him as ‘your highness’ was when he and Darcy fought.

He didn’t say anything and so the woman took another step towards him and gently placed a hand on his shoulder, her fingers slipping under his collar to stroke his clavicle. He didn’t know if he liked it. Darcy often did that, except her hands were different and her intentions in doing it were not of sexual nature.

He desperately wished that Darcy would stop entering his thoughts while he was trying to focus on the woman who had been talking cheerily to him, though he was not paying attention to her words, and slowly attempting to remove his armor. Cautiously, he took her hands, easing them aside.

“Please, allow me,” he said prepared to do away with most of his armor magically when he remembered to at least be a courteous guest and ask before performing magic. It was only polite. “Would you object to my use of magic?” he inquired.

The woman gave him a genuine smile, shaking her head. “Not at all.”

At this, he cast away his armor, save his trousers, and returned the woman’s grin with a tiny smile of his own. She wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on her toes to kiss him.

A few things flew through Loki’s mind before her lips could touch his.

Firstly that he had not kissed anyone but Sigyn unless kissing Darcy’s face could be credited.

Secondly, she was one of two women to see him shirtless. The only other being Darcy, however this encounter was much different than those nights in Thryheim.

Before she could kiss him, Loki stepped away. “Wait.”

She raised a prettily shaped brow at him. “Your brother said that this was your first time, but I did not think that a prince would be so hesitant.” She smiled, clearly humored by his tentativeness, and sat on the bed. “Please, Your Highness, I know what I’m doing.”

Loki studied her for a moment with his eyes narrowed. He didn’t know how he felt about his brother speaking to the first woman he was to lie with. “I beg your pardon, but what is your name?”

She cocked her head to the side, giving him a curious look. “Amora, your highness.”

“Please,” he said, swallowing down the bitter taste of his and Darcy’s falling-out. “Call me Loki or Your Majesty if you must.”

Amora continued to stare at him strangely, though it was not with any contempt. Eventually she giggled, offering him her hand. “Very well…Loki. Come here.”

Taking his hand, Amora pulled him down to kiss his lips.
Loki did not know what he had expected, but this was most definitely not it. Kisses in his experience had not been so forceful or so wanton. Amora’s kisses felt like sex and he nearly leapt out of his skin when her tongue brushed his.

Loki remembered Darcy’s kiss with Idiot Boy and how she had been disgusted when he ‘licked her mouth’. Perhaps Darcy should have been kissed by Amora, because having her lick his mouth was quite pleasant.

Slowly, Amora settled back, laying down so Loki was on his knees between her legs, his arms bent on either side of her head as she kept kissing him.

Just as he was starting to feel more relaxed with the prospect of this new style of kissing, Amora’s hands slid down his chest, stroking his newly obtained abdominal muscles. Loki quickly snatched her hand before she could go any further.

“Wait,” he interrupted again, pulling away from her mouth.

Amora was pink in the cheeks and her blonde hair fanned around her head. She was alluring, but Loki resisted temptation.

“Are you shy?” she asked sympathetically.

Loki shook his head, numbly attempting to think of a way to phrase the thoughts going through his head.

The side of her mouth pulled down in confusion. “Then I suppose you are just different. Most men cannot contain themselves when I reach for them.” Her smile open and friendly and she spoke like they were merely discussing the weather. “Do you prefer men? I suppose that would be awfully embarrassing for me not to notice. But I can go find a man if you like.”

Loki considered that for a moment. Honestly, he wasn’t sure if he preferred men or not. Did he prefer women? Did he have a preference? Why hadn’t he at least thought of these things before hand?

Being that he’d already gotten this far with Amora, he shook his head. “No, this is fine. I am just unsure of how to proceed. I understand the fundamentals of this, but I do not know how to be successful at it.”

Amora frowned. “Successful at what?”

“Sex,” Loki clarified, gesturing indifferently between them. He wasn’t nervous anymore now that he’d stated his apprehensions. Amora was a professional, perhaps she could teach him.

She giggled again, wrapping her legs around his hips and flipping them over. “Loki, you are adorable! Do not think about it so hard.”

She leaned over and placed a series of kisses on his neck, leaving miniscule chills in their wake. “Explain it to me then,” he breathed, as Amora removed her dress.

Loki suspected that Amora was a more expensive prostitute. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and a slight athletic body…she very much resembled a noblewoman. Perhaps she had been at one time. Beauty was something that Loki could appreciate in a body. Amora’s was beautiful in its own way. Her breasts were smaller than Darcy’s and her shape was less curvaceous. Even though he had not seen what Darcy looked like in the absence of her attire, he figured she would be just as stunning as ever she was.
Again he had to shove Darcy from his mind in order to lend his attention to the woman trailing kisses from his jaw to his temple.

Darcy sometimes kissed him there.

“It is not all that difficult,” Amora told him, moving her hips and Loki received a vague idea of what Thor and Fandrall meant by Valhalla. “You just know what you like, and I give it to you.”

She sat back on his thighs, tracing his chest again and making her way down to his pants. This time he let her. “Yes,” he agreed, struggling to keep his breath. “But what about what you like?”

Amora halted in her otherworldly ministrations to blink down at him. “I cannot tell if you jest or if you truly do not understand the meaning of prostitution.”

Loki made a face. “Is the purpose of intercourse not to achieve climactic pleasure?”

“It is,” Amora confirmed, “For me to give you. People do not come to brothels to give pleasure, they come to receive it.” She moved her hips to make a point and Loki gripped the sheets for dear life. “See?”

“And how is that supposed to be satisfying?” Loki inquired as she took his hands and held them to her breasts.

An involuntary moan fell from his lips and he instantly moved to sit up. Since when did he ever sound so wanton? Lost in need? For shame….

Amora grinned, her cheeks red as she pushed him back down. “That is how.”

“Yes, but what good is it,” he began, words cut short as he focused on not losing himself. He needed to know how to properly bring pleasure to his partner. Did Amora really expect that he knew how to already? Is that why she did not understand?

“Yes?” Amora urged him to continue while he gathered his wits.

Loki made to finish his thought. “What good is my pleasure if you have none?”

Amora stopped moving and Loki didn’t know whether to be grateful or disappointed. “You wish to please me, Prince Loki?”

Loki wondered if that was strange that he should care so much that she received as he did. “Yes. I do,” he replied honestly.

She pursed her lips for a moment before her smile was back, this time with true delight. “It’s rare that I find a lover amongst the bunch.” She laughed to herself, kissing him once on the cheek.

“What?” he asked lamely, his thoughts muddled by sex, an action that was turning out to be better than he expected.

“Give me your hands,” Amora directed, linking their fingers and changing her position.

“Wonderful,” she affirmed, her voice slightly higher pitched. “Now, breathe deeply, don’t move until you feel as though you will die of need and never stay silent unless you are taking risks where you ought not to be.”

Loki nodded, following her instruction the best he could and was immensely gratified when he could feel that she was now benefitting from their coition. They made sounds that went along with
the noises sex brought about and Loki took vague note in the back of his slowly melting mind that, as a result of their pleasure, a mess was made.

At last, he reached the point which she had warned him of. Amora was quickly bringing about his end, and in response he lifted his hips to meet hers. She choked out what would have been another sparkling laugh if her voice had not gotten caught in her throat. “Are you ready Your Majesty?”

He wondered what on Asgard he would need to be ready for when he felt cool magic wash over his body. Every one of his nerves came alive. It was magic unlike any he’d ever experienced and he desperately wished he could study it more closely.

Sadly, the sensation disappeared as Amora writhed above him and he too followed suit, coming to the conclusion that he ought to try this again.

Amora sighed and she relinquished her hold, collapsing beside him in what was usually Darcy’s spot. Displeased by the idea that Amora had taken Darcy’s place, he sat up, willing it not to be so.

“And you said it was your first time,” Amora chided, running a finger down his spine and sending tiny bursts of colorful sensation through his veins. Again he felt a dull magical pull he easily identified as hers as she stimulated every nerve ending inside him. “But I shall keep your secret.”

Loki wasn’t really paying attention, his thoughts absorbed by the magic she cast. “Amora, what—“

He was interrupted by a loud bang on the door and the brash voice of his dear brother. “Loki! What delays you?”

The door began to open and Loki was truly horrified by the audacity of his brother. To avoid inevitable humiliation, he lifted a hand and cast himself away to his corner of the library in the palace where he leaned heavily on a shelf that Darcy frequently organized.

Would she approve of what he’d just done? Would she care? Would he care if she had done the same?

He ran his thumb over the spines of a few books, thinking of the magic Amora had used. He doubted it was involuntary since it brought about their completion. But he had never, in all his years of study, come across anything that matched the description of Amora’s spell.

Curiosity initiated the intelligent part of Loki’s mind that he’d left dormant the past few weeks. He was going to find out more about this new kind of magic if he had to read every book on Asgard.

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Darcy was slowly getting bored at Culver.

As an educational environment, it was far superior to high school. She was learning a great deal about interpreting other people’s ideas and found that her skills as an Asgardian advisor applied to Midgardian political debates. She held her own in their scientific worlds, invigorated by the power of her own acumen.

She hadn’t considered before how truly knowledgeable she was. On Asgard, she did what needed to be done and argued what she believed was right. The Lords and Ladies knew her by name, street merchants smiled at her as she passed and noble-peoples invited her to their homes to discuss business transactions. Getting to know the people of Asgard was something she took a lot of her time to do. Understanding what the people of the realm wanted, balancing their needs, planning ahead a few hundred years in advance…it was an essential part to ruling that she believed many
Aesir failed to see.

Sitting in one of the lecture halls and listening to a very biased account of last election’s polls she became conscious of the fact that mortals could also benefit from widening their individual horizons.

Midgard was a much larger world in the political sense and Darcy believed it was because of the aggression. Asgardians, while they were a war-cultured realm, were fairly lax about politics. There were disagreements and Darcy had been in the heat of many, but if one was to look at a timeline of opposing viewpoints in Asgardian government, they would notice that the most drastic disagreement in the past few millennia had been the Norn’s rebellion a few years back.

Mortals battled with each other constantly. They were vicious, fought fire with fire, and specified their beliefs into the tiniest categories.

Darcy appreciated both methods of governing and during her time at Culver she wrote a series of philosophical papers that theorized an alternative government system. It was very rough in her opinion, but a few of the Culver professors that she took classes from read over her work and were currently in the process of helping her get the documents copyrighted and published.

Still, as much as Darcy was gaining from Culver, she was also becoming exceedingly bored.

Usually, she was Loki’s partner in crime. They made trouble together, took risks, went on adventures and so on.

She felt like she needed to do something mischievous just to alleviate the pressing, monotonous habitual way of life on Midgard. There were little things that just weren’t the same without Loki. No one startled her by suddenly appearing out of nowhere, her hair was unsatisfactory and she realized how long it’d been since she actually did it herself; none of the t-shirts she bought mysteriously turned green overnight and she didn’t have to barter with anyone to change them back; she didn’t have to wake anyone up and she had to find all of her reading materials by herself.

It was miserable. Her life was boring and Darcy was convinced that it was impossible to miss one annoying person so much. She felt like she’d lost an arm or maybe even something more precious like her breasts.

One night, after pacing around her luxurious and expensive single dorm, she finally got fed up with doing nothing and walked down the hall to Sharon’s door.

She answered after the first knock, dressed casually in a white sports shirt and yoga pants. Sharon was a fairly serious person and Darcy seemed childish in comparison. But she knew that Sharon enjoyed her company more than she let on.

They had a funny kind of friendship. Darcy had always been a really touchy person. She hugged people often, held hands with her friends, and cuddling was her second favorite hobby. It was just a casual part of who she was to bump her companion’s shoulder while walking or to use them as a pillow while watching a movie. She could tell that Sharon wasn’t used to that kind of thing. When they first started hanging out, she would jump every time Darcy touched her. Her reaction reminded Darcy of Sif, Sigyn and even Loki when she first met them. They just weren’t used to casual affection.

Of course, Darcy had a way of changing people. Sif and Sigyn were now some of the touchiest people she knew, especially with each other. Although, that probably had something to do with their clandestine love affair that, according to the sworn laws of sleepover secrecy, Darcy knew
nothing of. Then there was Loki who she was convinced needed cuddles to survive. He was so accustomed to touching her that he occasionally forgot that they weren’t alone and did things like squeeze her hand or wrap his arm around her for a quick hug. Darcy was also guilty of this and she was reminded of it through the media, which still liked to believe that the prince and his advisor were to start a courtship any day now.

Sharon was well on her way to being added to the list of people converted to overly affectionate cuddle-bugs. They were at the point where Sharon was not only tolerating the physical aspects of Darcy’s friendship, but reciprocating. She would nudge her in the side if she was being particularly irritating and sometimes she would sit close enough to Darcy that their legs touched. They had the foundations of a blossoming friendship and because of this, when Sharon opened her door, Darcy asked in a jokingly deep and mysterious tone if she wanted to go have some fun.

Sharon was unsure at first, but relented, letting Darcy drag her away. They walked a few blocks, and then ran down a few sidewalks that ultimately led them to the Virginia coastline situated near the university. They stood at the public entrance to the beach, marveling at locked up drink stands, stretches of long sandy beach and the moonlit view of the high tide just coming in.

“What are we doing here, Lewis?” Sharon asked skeptically as Darcy strode to the shoreline, kicking off her shoes in the process.

Believe it or not, Darcy Lewis was a free spirit and after several near death experiences, she made up her mind that life was made for fun and one should take advantage of the opportunity to take pleasure in it.

Darcy winked at Sharon over her shoulder. “I’m crossing something off my bucket list.”

Sharon looked confused for a moment before Darcy started running towards the water, stripping off her clothes in the process. “Lewis! We are not skinny dipping in the middle of the night! Put your fucking pants on!”

It was too late; Darcy was already submerged in the ocean, the fresh, salty waves washing over her bare skin.

Darcy thought both Asgardians and Midgardians made too big a deal of nudity. They had dumb rules like ‘girls can see girls naked, but if a boy sees a girl naked there will be sex.’

As friend to Sif and Sigyn, Darcy knew first hand that girls seeing girls naked could also lead to sex. Sif and Sigyn weren’t to that point in their relationship yet, but Darcy still had to stop bathing with them because of how nauseatingly demonstrative they were of their affections. All that wet naked love so close to Darcy while she was trying to wash her hair was too much.

But besides that new development, Darcy was fairly confident in her body. She was fit, granted not as fit as she had been. At the height of her anxiety, she started losing weight and she was just now starting to gain some of it back. Unfortunately, it wasn’t all coming back in the form of her varsity soccer player, all star muscles. Instead, it went to her hips and thighs and made her jeans fit a bit tighter.

Surfacing from the water, Darcy laughed at Sharon’s utter bewilderment. “Don’t love it till you try it!”

Sharon gave her a pointed glare. “You do realize this is public nudity, right?!?” she shouted over the waves. “Do you even care?!”
To answer her question, Darcy dived back under water, hoping that the waves didn’t knock away her glasses. She hadn’t taken them off. When she came back up for air, Sharon had her head tilted back, giving the sky an exasperated stare. “May Aunt Peggy never find out about this,” she muttered to herself, lifting the hem of her shirt, stripping down to her birthday suit and splashing into the water after her new crazy friend.

“Jesus Christ, Darcy!” Sharon shivered, crossing her arms over her chest. “It’s freezing!”

Darcy nodded in agreement, standing up and looking down at her breasts. “Yeah. I’m feeling pretty perky.”

Sharon gave her a withering glare. “This is stupid. We should go before we get caught.”

Sighing, Darcy glanced back to the shore and drifting a little with the wave that passed them. “I guess you’re right.”

“Yes, now—“

“But don’t you want to get a good sniff of the ocean first?” Darcy grinned wickedly, not giving Sharon time to realize that Darcy meant to douse her in cold seawater.

“Darcy Lewis, don’t you dare…oh Christ!”

It was too late, Darcy had already dunked under the waves, knocking Sharon’s legs out from under her, resurfacing and laughing her ass off Sharon sputtered.

Her blonde hair stuck to the sides of her face and she blew salt water out her nose. It was apparent in her eyes that Darcy had issued an irrefutable challenge. “I’ll give you five seconds, Lewis. Make ‘em count.”

Darcy really tried to make them count, but in the end, Sharon was the better swimmer and she found herself being dunked under the waves. They splashed around, trying to catch one another and laughing all the while.

Life was pretty great until the sudden sound of approaching cars and the telltale flash of white, red, and blue lights emerged in the parking lot.

“Shit!” Sharon swore, racing to shore and hastily picking up her clothes which were now full of sand. “Shit. Shit shit!”

Darcy followed suit, sifting through the sand for her sports bra and jeans. “Dude, relax.”

Sharon had pulled her pants on inside out and was glaring at Darcy as they heard car doors opening and closing. “Shut the hell up, Lewis! Run!”

Darcy had her jeans on and her sports bra in hand as Sharon pulled on her shirt, sprinting along the beach to find an alternate exit. Darcy kept up, though it was extremely difficult to run without a brassiere to hold one’s obnoxiously large breasts in place.

“Sharon!” Darcy shouted in a whisper as they approached a wooden flight of stairs that led away from the beach. From the other parking lot, a police officer with a megaphone stood by the water, shouting some muffled bullshit about how ‘the beach was off limits at this time’.

The two girls ducked down, silently trotting up the stairs while Darcy struggled to fit her damp breasts into her sandy sports bra. Her shoes were full of rocks and she’d left her shirt by the water.
Needless to say, it wasn’t the most comfortable experience.

Finally, they made it up the stairs and to the parking lot and they crouched by the bushes, watching as a police woman exited the vehicle and also headed for the beach, leaving the car unattended.

Sharon silently gestured with two fingers for them to continue onwards. Darcy followed in her wake, matching her stealth as they crept from the parking lot and to the main road leading back to Culver.

As soon as they were out of the police’s vicinity, they stopped, leaning against a wall. Darcy sighed, letting out a victorious laugh. “Haha! Close call, huh?”

Sharon gave her a look more forceful than gunshot. “I swear to God, Lewis, I—“

Her speech was cut short by the roar of a revving engine and the sound of a siren.

Without question, both girls started running again, their legs, conditioned from their dedication to morning runs and afternoon yoga, carrying them at raging speeds around the block.

They kept running until the sound of sirens disappeared and they were back on Culver campus. With all the power that remained in their soaked, gritty bodies they shut themselves in Sharon’s room, leaning against the door and sinking to the ground in painful relief.

They looked to one another, panting and suffering from a mix of overheated exhaustion and damp coldness. After a few empty seconds of silence, the two broke out into a fit of hysterias.

Their lungs protested at the efforts of their humor, yet they couldn’t stop. They laughed and laughed, then laughed some more until Sharon was finally able to make out a few words. “Darcy… I hate you.”

Darcy rubbed her aching sides, her grin nearly splitting her face in two. “I love you too, babe.”

The blonde let the back of her head thump against the door. “You’re fucking ridiculous.”

“I know,” Darcy said, exhaling loudly as her heart went back to its normal pace. Loki called her ridiculous all the time.

She turned to face Sharon and became entrapped by the intensity of her eyes. In that bare moment, Darcy thought back to her first and only kiss with Nick Benedict in her bedroom. Loki still teased her about it and the idea that ‘idiot boys’ were nothing but trouble.

Darcy should have learned her lesson about acting on impulse by what happened with Loki and her recent dip in the ocean. But sitting on the floor of Sharon’s room, soaked to the bone and painstakingly curious, she tilted her head and softly kissed Sharon Carter full on the mouth.

Genuinely shocked by her own abruptness, Darcy pulled away, red in the face and battling a rolling wave of embarrassment. “Sharon. Shit. I…can explain…”

Sharon smirked, rolling her eyes and hushing Darcy with a short but sure peck to her pouty lips. “Shut up, Lewis.”

Darcy sure as hell wasn’t going to dispute such a convincing argument and she licked her salty lips, a slow build of excitement in her chest making her toes curl. “Yes Ma’am.”

And thus began Darcy’s first summer fling.
Loki was at his wit’s end.

He’d spent an entire day searching Asgard’s archives for a book on magic sexual practices and found not a damn thing.

According to the lack of books in his possession, no such magic ever existed or was ever practiced at any given point or time.

Loki, as a creator of spells and magic, knew from experience that the absence of recorded documents meant only one thing: The architect of said sorcery was still alive.

Loki didn’t really want to go back to the brothel. While he did want to have more sex, he wasn’t sure he wanted it to have it there. However, there was a maker of entirely new magical application at the brothel and Loki was incalculably interested.

He had never met any sorcerers or sorceresses that created and used magic as he did. But the technique used by Amora was vastly different from anything he’d ever felt before. It matched neither his style nor any other he’d come across.

At first he wondered why no one else had delved into research about the brothel’s strange magical conduct, and then he realized that he was most likely one of the few people on Asgard that would be able to identify such a subtle stimulation as a magical sensation.

He desperately wanted Darcy’s opinion on the matter. Then again, Darcy must never know about any of this. What would she say? Loki did not really wish to find out.

Instead of thinking about Darcy, he made up his mind that he needed to discover the creator of this new brand of magic. He wanted to see how they used magic and if it was anything like his own method.

And henceforth he developed a scheme.

There was no way in Hel he was going to be seen entering the brothel again. He was a prince and while prostitution was considered an honest and even noble profession, the higher class still tended to think obvious hire of whores was uncouth. Also, he was uncomfortable with spending the crown’s money on sex. Though they had much to spare, Loki didn’t know if it was worth another orgasm, no matter how glorious the first had been.

He would take the necessary funds with him, but for the sake of education rather than pleasure.

Being a master of illusion, Loki changed his appearance to that of a common faced man in bland clothing and used the front entrance, approaching the polished wood desk in the perfumed foyer where a woman with an inviting gaze greeted him.

He asked for Amora and paid the price for his visitation; his intentions were not what he led them to believe.

He waited in a room much like the one he’d been in the day prior. In hardly anytime at all, the door opened and in strode the yellow haired, pink cheeked woman who had honorably accepted his virginity. She looked at him suspiciously. “I don’t remember seeing you before. Yet you asked for me specifically.”

Loki shrugged in his different form. “You were recommended to me.”
She grinned saucily, stepping towards him alluringly. “Really? By whom?”

With a haughty smirk, Loki released the illusion he’d cast, revealing himself to her. “A prince.”

She gasped, her eyes glassy as she took in the depth of his spell work. “Again so soon, Your Majesty?”

“No, I do not think so,” he said, approaching her slowly, trying to decipher the magical power she possessed. Looking down at her heart-shaped face, he spoke clearly and directly so that his desires would not be misinterpreted. “At our last meeting, you performed magic upon my person; magic of which I have never experienced. It has taken my interest and I wish to know of its origins.”

Amora stared at him as if he was the strangest thing she’d ever seen in her life. Ever so slowly, her eyes brightened and she beamed at him with unequivocal glee. “Oh Loki! You are special, aren’t you?” she giggled, her cheeks flushing excitedly with color. Not bothering to hesitate, she took his hand and led him out into the hall. “Come, I will bring you to Angrboða. I cannot tell you what you wish to know unless she deems you worthy.”

Loki didn’t know whether to be grateful or fearful as she tugged him along the enticing halls that seemed to ooze sex.

Finally, they arrived at very tall and very wide double doors. Amora let go of his hand to grasp both handles, throwing them open and striding inside, gesturing eagerly for Loki to follow.

Uncertainly, he paced under a great stone archway into one of the most beautiful rooms he’d ever seen.

There was a bed larger than even his own, draped with light blue bedding and white furs, furniture littered around the room with sashes of fluttering fabric thrown about them, bottles of perfumes and wine were scattered on open surfaces and on the stone walls hung fantastical tapestries that reminded Loki of his mother’s work. A balcony extended from the chamber, ivy vines winding around the delicate railings, and leading way to a breathtaking view of the Asgardian skyline. Even at the distance at which he stood from it, he felt an overwhelming sense of majesty.

But the true source of Loki’s wonder was the woman Amora had brought him to meet.

With her back to him, she was a perfect silhouette against the rising suns of the Asgardian dawn, a dark heroine garbed in a black robe of mourning. She was a prominent shadow, a foreboding salvation, and a shrine worshipped by gods.

Loki was never speechless. He prided himself on his Silvertongue and quick wit, but this woman had stolen all his words.

Amora skipped to her side and Loki gasped when he realized that this spectacle of a person was a true giantess. Amora was unphased by the woman's greatness, taking her large dark hand in her small pale ones and kissing her sable knuckles.

“Angrboða,” she said adoringly, “Someone wishes to meet you.”

Loki listened, his throat thick with anticipation as she spoke.

“Do they?” Angrboða’s voice was musical and very quiet. With only two quaint syllables, she instilled tenderness in Loki like he’d never felt before. She was a chorus, enthralling with the full power of intense softness.
Amora nodded vigorously, her blonde locks brushing Angrboða’s exposed elbow. “Yes. He’s a lover, my lady. I can sense it.”

They were quiet for a moment and suddenly Loki feared rejection. Would she deem him worthy? He had not taken into consideration if he’d been successful at sex, the question of newfound magic distracting him from his initial anxieties. Perhaps Amora thought too highly of him.

At long last, Angrboða spoke, the mass of long delicate curls that hung to her waist swayed when she looked down at Amora. “Describe him to me.”

Loki prepared for the worst. His physical appearance, by Asgardian higher class standards was not considerably appealing and he did not want this woman’s impression of him to be based on image. While he no longer held shame or resentment for his black hair and wiry form, he was aware of that they were less than inviting qualities.

Amora cocked her head to the side, thinking intently. She fixed her gaze upon him, scrutinizing his every inch. “His eyes are green and he stands like a royal.”

Angrboða hummed and the sound vibrated his very soul. “What more?”

The blonde squinted as if she could sense even more from him than she already had. “He is very expressive even though he tries not to be. And he is quite gifted.” She paused to shoot him a cheeky grin and a quick wink. “Magically gifted, I mean.”

There was an unbearable stretch of silence and Loki wished very much that Darcy was there with him. He knew she would see Angrboða for the enigma she was.

“You are missing something, my dear.” Angrboða said and Loki wondered if she was smiling. “I will meet him.”

He braced himself, straightening his spine and relaxing his fingers, preparing for the face of his fascination.

She turned slowly as if she were her own world, obligated to nothing as she spun on the axis of her sculpted feet. Moons and stardust caught in her orbit, circling the curve of her hip and the edge of her shoulders. She held in her hands infinite space.

Finally she faced him and Loki considered kneeling. He had knelt for only two in his time. The first being the Allfather because he must, and the second being Darcy because he could not imagine truly caring for anyone as he did her. He knelt to her because she deserved it.

But Angrboða was another creature entirely.

She was pure. Her face was strong and exotic, thick lashes and full lips like Darcy’s. The skin of her dark throat shone, glimmering down past her collarbone and over her chest. A black robe hung on her body like a bride’s veil; temporary and obscuring from view that which anyone could ever hope to see.

He met her eyes, astounded by their near ebony shade that he could only determine from her pupils by the light of the sun. But what more was their melancholy. No eyes in Yggdrasil could have been sadder. Their darkened depths masked the detail of her anguish, leaving behind the face of timeless sorrow.

“A Son of Odin comes to my house to meet me and I have only an idea of what for,” Angrboða said in her mystic voice, snapping Loki from his entrancement.
He bowed his head respectfully, struggling to maintain what little composure he had left. “Lady Angrboða—“

She lifted her chin, her sharp gesture halting his speech. “No need for formalities. I am not a lady by class standards.” She looked him up and down and Loki checked to make sure he was not devoid of his clothing. “Then again,” she said in a voice as soft as her stance, “you are not quite like them, are you?”

“Perhaps not,” Loki corrected himself, focusing on his words as to not be distracted by the miracle of her existence.

Angrboða did not smile, though Loki found that her face was kind enough without the gesture. Anything he ever needed to perceive from her he could read in her deep eyes. She continued to stare at him as if he were a puzzle she’d already solved and was now trying to decipher the image she’d created. “You desire something.”

Loki nodded slightly. “I seek knowledge.”

The other worldly woman searched him again. “No. That is not it.”

This confused Loki. He knew very much what he desired and that was to learn of this inventive new breed of magic. Perhaps if he rephrased. “I seek to learn of a specific brand of magic.”

“Magic,” Angrboða said with humor chiming in her tone, a small smile setting the foundation for a symphony across her face. “I believe you seek magic, my prince, but perhaps not the kind you are thinking of.”

“Are you implying that I do not know what I want?” Loki asked, not with aggression, but simply surprise. How was a woman he’d just met to know what he wanted and what he didn’t?

“We rarely know what we want,” Angrboða said plainly, her stature unbending. “I am saying that while I can give you what you think you want, it will not satisfy you.”

Her words were riddles, each one with a different key that only she held. Loki could not unlock her meaning. Was anyone ever truly satisfied? Why should this make a difference?

“Do you still wish to know?”

Loki considered her question for a moment, fairly sure of its implications. “Yes.”

Angrboða tilted her head to the side in acceptance of his decision. “Amora, guide him.”

Amora nodded and Angrboða shifted again, her planetary demeanor returning as she brought her attention back to the Asgardian skyline, traveling to a world far away.

He accepted his dismissal and Amora took his hand, pulling him away, defying her lady’s gravitational force.

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Darcy spent the rest of her summer at Culver having a blast.

Her unexpected relationship with Sharon may have had something to do with it.

After that night when they sat by her door, grossly covered in sand and salt, Darcy headed for the showers and spent a good thirty seconds pondering her sexuality.
With a great deal of internal debate, she decided that she didn’t really care. She’d just go with it.

And go with it she did. Darcy had thought about kissing people before, but Sharon put all of her daydreams to shame. She was such a serious person, but despite her preppy dress and obsession with athletics, she appeared to Darcy as an unconventional ‘bad-girl’.

Sharon didn’t take anyone’s shit unless that one was Darcy, but even with her there were lines she would not cross. She was sarcastic and short with her words; and she treated everyone as her equal no matter their age or status. If they belittled her, she would bust their knee-caps to take them down to her height. If they belittled themselves, she offered a hand to help them stand level with herself.

Darcy found it incredibly attractive, especially when she could convince her to do absurd, uncharacteristic things like go skinny-dipping in the middle of the night on a public beach. She could tell that Sharon Carter had never done anything to just have fun just for the hell of it, taking risks because she could, or even breaking the rules just to test their validity.

Meeting Sharon taught Darcy that even though she typically chided Loki for his dangerous escapades, she was just as bad. She craved the excitement just as much as he did. The only difference was, Darcy could rightly identify where the line was drawn between ‘fun’ and ‘extremely dangerous’. For Loki they were often one in the same.

Sharon was a bit like Loki’s sullen, bored, political demeanor. Her lips were shaped a bit like Loki’s and she had no tolerance for anyone that couldn’t understand her perspectives straight away. She was irritable sometimes and even if she was frustrated with Darcy, she still would follow her around places.

She also had an undying propensity to ignore all social expectations and do whatever the hell she wanted so long as it was ‘legal’.

In other words: Their PDA was out of control.

They never officially established their relationship, it just was. Ever since their sandy night on Sharon’s floor, smiles came easy and kisses came easier. They laughed and did things together and canoodled. They actually did a great deal of canoodling. But there was an unspoken truth between them that their relationship wouldn't last. They kept their secrets and their concerns, enjoying the present as it were.

Before they went to their separate seminars, Sharon would grab her face and they would exchange a kiss that was far from chaste. If anyone cared, they didn’t say. At night, they got more handsy and Darcy scored her way through a few of the bases over the course of a month.

It was fun and Darcy was having a great time living in the moment while only thinking of Loki all the time.

Even though she and Sharon would spend great portions of the night together, kissing or just hanging out, Darcy couldn’t bring herself to ever spend the night in her bed or let Sharon into hers. It felt too much like she was replacing Loki, as strange as that sounded.

Maybe it was guilt. Maybe she just loved him. Maybe he was just being annoying from a distance by constantly occupying her thoughts. She hurt him and she only hoped that the letter she left would be enough to convey how deeply sorry she was. Would he forgive her? Did he think about her as much as she thought about him?

Thoughts of him were forever lurking in the back of her mind. No distraction could ever remove
the idea that her friendship with him could be lost. She didn’t think about Asgard or Infinity Stones, her lessons with Frigga or the war with Vanaheim. Once she had Loki back she could start considering them again.

Since she didn’t have Loki, she focused instead on Midgardian studies. She caught up on the scientific studies she’d begun to abandon in favor of politics, she wrote essays and watched documentaries on obscure topics that a few college students on campus over the summer recommended to her.

Darcy also spent a lot of time in the library with Betty Ross.

She was quiet, intelligent, and was a low-key badass. Betty wasn’t openly abrasive like Sharon. For one thing, she was a lot older and was kind of like the cool aunt Darcy never had. But it wasn’t in her nature to be so forthright. She was more subtle, the brains to an underlying brawn revealed only by rage. Even so she got the feeling that the woman was fierce. Betty never openly stated that she had been in a relationship with Bruce Banner; it was tacit knowledge between them and Darcy spent enough time with Tyr to get that she was still in love with him even if no one really knew where he was in the world.

They didn’t say much to one another, but their quiet companionship was pleasant. It gave Darcy time to study and Betty always brought her new things to read. They discussed authors and science and art and literature. She was a sharp woman and Darcy appreciated her mind. Betty Ross was officially on her list of role models. As far as librarians went, she was the coolest.

At one point, Darcy called her mom and told her about the theories that were going to be published. It was rare that Mrs. Lewis ever cried, but she did then, gushing about how proud she was and how she was so glad Darcy had decided to go to Culver that summer.

The ‘heavy workload’ the university promised made Darcy laugh. While the nine other specifically selected high school students that got accepted into the program struggled to get the assignments done, Darcy had already flitted through them. Petty research papers and persuasive essays meant for simpletons were nothing compared to what she had been doing as advisor. She could do all those things in her sleep and to keep her mind busy she asked a few of the professors for extra work because she had nothing else to do except sit around and be a badass.

Darcy was reluctantly thankful Loki had inadvertently made her go to Culver. It was a wonderful place, the campus was excellent and the curriculum was rigorous. She only hoped that when she sent her applications in a couple of years they would accept her.

And she prayed to any god that claimed to exist that Loki might visit her while she was at college. One summer was bad enough; she didn’t want to go a whole year.

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Loki lay contentedly between two of his many new bedmates, Amora and Ain.

When Angrboða said that Amora was to ‘guide him’ what she actually meant was ‘teach him to be a whore’.

According to Amora, the only person who could truly teach the magic to him was Angrboða and he couldn’t learn it from Angrboða until he understood how to properly bed his partner or partners.

When he asked Amora how much he would have to pay for such education she replied with the charming statement: “We don’t charge trainees.”
And that is how Loki came to be in his current situation.

Every morning Thor woke him up and they would go about their intense fighting and violent combat until high noon. Loki would then bathe and spend time with Jörmungandr and Fenrir who missed Darcy as much as he did. They whined at him and sat by the stables with Hel.

His horse was mad at him, which was one of the least gratifying experiences of Loki’s life. It was obvious that she took his denial to mount her and ride them to the portal was his way of keeping Darcy away from them. And therefore, Hel ignored him and moodily sat with Jörmungandr and Fenrir while they made noises at each other.

After the mournful time spent with his animals, he would magically transport himself to the brothel where Amora would take him by the hand and drag him off to some new people to couple with.

On rare days, she took him to Angrboða.

These days contained some of the most confusing hours of his life.

Angrboða didn’t teach him spells like the Asgardian sorceresses did. She didn’t ask him to show her different enchantments and she didn’t present him with any reading materials.

Yet, he was still learning in a way he could not understand.

While Amora dealt with his physical capabilities, Angrboða focused his magical ones.

They sat on the floor on one of the deep blue rugs that hid the cold floor beneath. Angrboða would hold out her great, elegant hands palms open. Loki would place his hands over hers, watching her eyes as she passed energy to him and waited for him to pass it back. And with each transaction, he learned to pass the magic differently.

It was a conversation of sorts and Loki detected that it was a training device that gave him insight to Angrboða’s magical style.

It was different, just as she was different. Much like his own methods, she abandoned the popular configurations of modern sorcery in favor of a more effective technique.

But where Loki used magic as a muscle, a direct extension of himself that he had control over, Angrboða treated magic as if it were a liquid. It spilled from her being and swelled in waves over its recipient. Loki often felt as though he was being washed away and when he tried to keep the tumultuous roar of their silent conversation at bay, Angrboða would chide him gently, squeezing his fingers. She often said to him: “There is no control here.”

And directly after, their interaction would end and he would sit pondering how such an exchange began in the first place. Angrboða would return to her balcony to watch the sky like a statue, her black robe a mocking tarp that hid the masterpiece.

His time with Amora was less intriguing, however it was simpler.

She played games with him, Amora did. She had a particular fancy for guessing what he liked in a partner and what he didn’t as she claimed it was her duty at the brothel to deliver to their customers a person that suited their tastes. Countless sessions were spent with him pleasuring and being pleased by sultry, experienced bodies, all which had once been foreign and exotic to him, he now could identify by taste.

It was a unique process of trial and error. Amora never told him exactly what to do, she just sent
him in a room with people, or peoples, and Loki had to figure it out on his own.

Admittedly, it was all a bit like magic. There was no defined pattern or method to finding pleasure. Every person was different; they felt different and tasted different, they liked different things and had different quirks. The trick was to figure out what they liked, how they liked it, and where they liked it.

And after he knew that, all that was left was performance.

Amora claimed that everyone performed better with the kind of person they were attracted to. Say for example Loki liked men with red hair, such as Ain, Amora would try to pair him to a partner of his taste even though he claimed he had no particular preference.

This was almost true. Loki had quickly decided that he very much enjoyed sex and he no longer had any qualms about fucking every whore in the brothel. He liked watching his partners shiver and sigh as he tended to their needs and wanted for his attentions. It was magnificent.

But he had an undeniable fixation on curvier women. He liked breasts that filled his hands and thighs that could cradle his narrow hips forever. He didn’t have a very good reason for liking them more, he just did. They felt better, warmer…softer.

He also liked men for his own reasons. They reached parts of him that no woman ever could and he found them to be equally fine bedmates.

Amora sighed, stretching across his chest and Ain kissed his shoulder languidly. “Loki, I know now why they call you Silvertongue,” she said tiredly, as the sun was just beginning to set and they’d just had quite an athletic round of pleasure that tried his flexibility multiple times.

He smirked at her compliment; that was another thing that Loki especially liked about women. Getting lost between their thighs, making a mess of the sheets while they pulled his hair was often more rewarding than being inside them.

“Mm,” he hummed, lightly caressing her back. He’d become quite fond of Amora. She was excitable and accepting and claimed her reason for becoming a prostitute was because it made her feel powerful and she got to meet new people all the time.

Ain chuckled, propping himself up to offer Amora a humored grin. “Amora, you should really be careful about what you say in bed. Do you not recall the unfortunate events of yesterday?”

Her pale face turned bright pink and she threw her pillow at Ain. He laughed aloud, standing up and walking to a table against the wall, pouring himself a glass of wine and Loki watched him, licking his lips where the taste of Amora remained.

In a house where the sole purpose was pleasure, clothes were optional. Loki had suddenly become more confident of his body than ever before. Having countless lovers achieve climax by his hand brought to light that he need not be muscular like his brother to please someone. And so he found himself naked more often than not.

He sat up, facing Ain with a sly grin. “Care to elaborate on said unfortunate events?”

Amora protested, kneeling behind him and putting her hands over his ears. “Do not tell him. He will never forgive me.”

Ain grinned ear to ear, falling back in bed and handing Loki his half full glass of wine. “Yesterday Amora was on duty…”
She groaned falling back against the pillows and covering her face with her hands. Loki leaned back as well, pulling her leg across his chest and kissing her knee. “And?”

“And she had your brother as a client,” Ain said, watching in delight as Amora shook her head in humiliation.

Loki grimaced. “I cannot imagine it to be that horrible.”

Amora sighed exasperatedly, not meeting his eyes. “No, it’s not ever horrible with him—“

Loki made a disgusted face without meaning to at the thought of Thor and Amora. It was not something he wished to see again. “Is that something that happens often?”

“He’s tickled her fancy,” Ain said, snorting loudly and Amora threw another pillow at him. “Amongst other things.”

Releasing Amora’s leg, Loki sat up swallowing the contents of his glass. “No more. By the gods, no more.”

“That is not even the best part!” Ain cackled as Amora tried to cover his mouth. He fought her off, delivering the rest of his tale through breathless hysterias. “After they coupled…she told him that your hammer was larger!”

Loki didn’t know whether to feel pride or disgust. He went with both. “What part of ‘no more’ do you not understand?”

Ain went to go get more wine and Amora smacked him affectionately on the rear. “Leave this place, you dog. I need to speak with Loki.”

The red-haired man chuckled, waving farewell and taking with him the wine.

Amora looked at him, embarrassed. “I am sorry—“

“Amora, do not...” Loki warned, trying to avoid more talk of his brother.

“I won’t,” she assured, turning on her side and watching him with a steady gaze. “You are exquisite in bed.”

“Indeed,” Loki agreed, settling down in the bedding to face her. “I learned from the best.”

“Well,” she giggled, reaching out to touch his hair, but he stopped her, taking her wrist and moving her hand to his shoulder instead. He missed Darcy far too much to let Amora run her fingers through his hair. She gave him an odd sort of look, but continued speaking. “But you have yet to make love.”

He smirked, stretching his arms behind his head. “I think you might have contradicted yourself.”

She scooted closer, pushing him down and straddling his thighs. “I have not. There is a difference between them.”

“How do you mean?” Loki inquired curiously, trailing his fingers along her legs while she spoke.

“Anyone can get caught in the carnal throes of passion,” she shrugged, “but you must feel more than lust to make love.”

She licked his neck and Loki responded, lifting his chin to give her better access. “That is implied.
I have not been given the opportunity."

“But you will be soon enough. Angrboða offered to teach you if you wish it, Loki,” Amora told him seriously, a wondrous look in her eyes. “She would only do that if she saw in you potential.”

“Potential,” Loki echoed her, weighing the word in his mind.

Setting her hands on his stomach, she gave him more serious a look than he’d ever seen on her heart-shaped face. “Angrboða always says that being a lover goes beyond coupling. She says you could be in love with someone your entire life, not once sharing even a kiss, and be the greatest lover there ever was. They feel deeply,” she said knowingly, sniffing as an unexpected tear escaped her eye. “There is an unyielding ache because it hurts to love and a merciless need for air because all you have belongs to them.” She pressed a fist against her heart, squeezing her eyes shut as they spilled grief over her face.

“She saw that I am in love?” Loki asked, gently wiping her pink cheeks.

“No,” Amora shook her head, mused blonde curls bouncing in the process. “She saw that you are in pain. ‘Tis always the broken ones willing to give away all they are in the name of love.”

Loki never imagined a year ago that he might lie nude in a brothel, comforting his prostitute friend while she cried over a lover he knew not the name of. He didn’t ask her anything, letting her weep until the sobs resided and her eyes were puffy and red.

Eventually, she calmed down enough to speak, cupping his cheek in her salty wet palm. “Soon the time will be right and Angrboða will teach you the magic you wish to know. But she is right Loki.”

Amora stood, picking up her dress from the floor and sliding it on. Loki slowly arose, gazing at her intently, waiting for her to finish her thought.

At the door, Amora glanced back at him with wide, teary eyes. “It will not satisfy you.”

***

Darcy’s looked upon her last day at Culver with a sense of nostalgic grief.

She would miss the campus and her expensive dorm, the beach nearby and the learning experience. She would miss the library and Betty Ross and her summer days spent with Sharon.

Darcy didn’t ask for Sharon’s number and vice versa. It was unspoken knowledge that their relationship that summer was not meant to last. It had been fun and now it was over; it was time to return to their lives and Darcy was glad to have meant something to Sharon, if not for only a few months.

“Try not cause too much trouble, Lewis, alright?” Sharon suggested with a slightly melancholy smile.

“Sure,” Darcy smirked, crossing her arms. “You try not to get your foot stuck when you’re busy kicking ass, alright?”

They shared one last laugh, kissing goodbye. And before Sharon walked to her parent’s car to head back home, she held out her strong arms for a hug that Darcy accepted with a sense of victory. She’d finally added Sharon to the list of converted cuddle-bugs.

When Sharon’s car disappeared down the road, Darcy decided to take one last stop in the library to
see Betty Ross. She sat at the front desk, her feet propped up on the counter as she read a book. Darcy approached silently as Betty looked up from her heavy novel. “I thought you’d be gone by now.”

Darcy shook her head. “I’m leaving in an hour, but I wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

Betty smiled kindly, the small smile wrinkles in the corners of her eyes adding to her radiance. “I’m glad you did. I have something for you.”

Stowing her book, she reached into a large canvas bag at her side and pulled from it’s depths a notebook that looked like every page had been used. Darcy accepted it uncertainly, flipping open the cover to read the name ‘Bruce Banner’ in messy scrawl. She gasped in shock, resisting the urge to read through the entire thing.

Betty cleared her throat. “Those are his original notes. This was the only journal he didn’t burn after...well...you know.”

…after he broke Harlem. Darcy added in her head. “Betty, I can’t accept these. He probably wouldn’t want some kid to have them.”

The woman shook her head, giving Darcy a steady, confident gaze. “You are not just ‘some kid’ Darcy Lewis. He left it in my possession and there is nothing in there that I don’t already know. I could recite the entire damn thing to you in my sleep. And between you and me,” she leaned forwards and spoke in a hushed tone that exceeded a libraries silent expectations, “it’s probably safer with you. If it is in your hands, I know that nothing bad will come of it. You’re a tame experimentalist.”

Darcy chuckled, looking down at the journal again. “Thank you, Betty. I know how much this must mean to you.”

Reaching across the counter, Betty squeezed her hand. “I only hope that it will inspire some of your more philosophical ideas about self-control.”

They smiled and bid the other farewell once more.

It wasn’t long before Darcy’s cab arrived to take her to the airport and it was not long after that she boarded her flight. The entire time, Darcy could think of only one person and she hoped they might be thinking of her too.

***

The day before Darcy returned, Loki spent his entire day at the brothel, making his farewells. He did not intend to return once she was back in his life. His salacious new companions that hid sorrow in their passion had been the balm to heal the tear in his side from where Darcy had been pulled. They were the company to his misery and they bandaged his wounds with knowledge and pleasure, attempting to sate their love with his body.

His injury was a paradox. The gushing wound never needed their attentions because the reality was that he was not damaged. Distance was a silly thing, for no amount of space in the universe could separate him from Darcy.

He kissed them all goodbye and they congratulated him on being a proper whore. They laughed together over a few glasses of wine, passing the time with sighs and moans.

By the time evening came round, he took Amora’s hand in a soundless request to see Angrboða.
They walked to her quarters together in comfortable silence and when they arrived at the massive doors, Amora stood on her toes to kiss him. They said nothing to one another, for there was nothing to say that could possibly be portrayed by mere words. She departed with one last crooked grin, her blonde curls disappearing around the corner.

After she was gone, Loki didn’t hesitate to open the doors and slip inside.

The room was illuminated by night. The prominent blues that shone during the day were soft in the moonbeam’s grasp. The entire chamber glowed with silver as if it were a memory, blurred around the edges and sharp with nostalgia of a time past.

A black robe, draped across the back of a shiny chaise, cast a hole of emptiness in the ethereal aura, leaving Angrboða to stand on her balcony as the lone, perfect silhouette against the stars.

With a steady hand, he magicked away his own attire, pacing forwards to stand at her side and bask in the glory of Asgard and the stars. It was lovely, but his thoughts remained on a short mortal girl who outshined his realm’s beauty without lifting a finger.

“Tell me what you see Loki,” Angrboða said in her musical voice that was softer than even the lightest down.

He watched Asgard’s capital, making note of the different buildings that Darcy often talked about, streets they’d walked together and collegiums that he sat in to mourn their severance. “I see a city that grows only by the hand of a careful gardener who has gone away.”

Angrboða chuckled and Loki refrained from turning to her, at least not yet. He would wait for her.

“When we look upon a place and it does not hold what we desire, it is unimpressive. The stars pale in comparison to the light of our lives.” Angrboða said as a warm breeze swirled around them, her hair brushing his arm. “Will you see her again?”

Loki’s eyes went to Angrboða’s melancholy face, carved by time and sorrow to shape a vision of eternal love. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes.” Her full lips mouthed the truth which she had come to hold. “Amora was not lying when she said you were expressive. Your solace comes from your remembrance of her, but so does your pain.”

Loki did not argue the reality of his longing and chose instead to grimace at the sky. “I will see her again soon.”

“You are distraught that she is gone,” Angrboða murmured, lifting her chin to the skies and Loki believed that she was peeking at Valhalla from her great height, “yet you fear her return.”

Loki averted his gaze from the distant lights in the sky, quickly losing faith in their endless existence. “Her absence is the result of our fight. I fear she will not wish to see me again.”

He shocked himself with his admittance of worry. No such proclamation would dare slip past his lips to just anyone.

Angrboða chuckled again, a bit louder this time, the echoes of her cosmic voice making his blood sing. “She will.”

“How can you be so sure?” Loki inquired, searching for any reason why Darcy might not be upset with him and that all was truly forgiven.
Humming lowly, she answered him in a quiet tone that imitated the silvery room they stood on the precipice of. “Amora has met she who tears the weeds from this city that does not impress you. Only by watching day after day have I seen the growth of Asgard’s long docile seeds by her hand.”

Loki’s jaw slacked in disbelief. “She knows Darcy? Darcy has been here?”

At this, Angrboða gifted with one of her rare toothy grins, the shine of her teeth competed in fair battle with the stars. “Is that her name? Your advisor? I confess that time slips away from me. Often times I do not collect happenings. I only watch them.”

Loki was still coming to terms with the fact that Darcy had been to the brothel before him. Angrboða sighed. “She did not come for what you believe, Loki. She and a few attendants drank and passed around their humor until she was assured that we were not a place of violation.” She paused for Loki’s unintentional sigh of relief. “Amora professed she is lovely.”

“She is brilliant.” He was lost again, caught up in a mindless thought of him and Darcy coming back sometime to drink and share merriment with whores.

“You love her deeply,” Angrboða confirmed, turning to face him, her profound, melancholic eyes settling on his face. “But are you in love with her?”

Loki prepared to repeat the line he recited to Thor every day, and to tell her that he and Darcy were not together nor had they ever been. But he stopped himself, pondering the depths of her question with a sincerity he had yet to use. The answer did not wait on the tip of his tongue and no matter how far he dug into his mind, he could find neither a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to give her.

“I do not know,” he told her, confounded by his own words.

“You will,” Angrboða assured, gently running her long ebony fingers across his bare shoulder.

He accepted her invitation, placing a kiss on her defined collarbone, tasting the majesty on her skin. She cradled his face in her palms, bowing her head to kiss him.

Finally, Loki allowed himself to learn her body as he had imagined from the instant he first saw her. With musicians’ hands, he trailed his fingertips down her sides and over her breasts, curiously running his thumbs across scars. The faint marks on her skin mapped the untold story of her life and Loki chose not to read too deeply; he only navigated. There were small scars that freckled her arms and longer ones that stretched across her belly. He knew that carrying a child scared women’s skin, but the Aesir healed so quickly that they often disappeared overtime as his mother told him.

The marks added to Angrboða’s magical perfection. They suited her and when the two of them fell into her enormous bed he kissed them, wondering if he would ever have the opportunity to see such scars again.

They moved together in unhurried strokes, taking the opportunity to make love without the burden of consequence.

Loki released his thoughts of everything but his passionate dedication, not only to pleasure, but to Angrboða as the mysteriously glorious person that she was. And through their efforts he felt her magic douse him in its unique liquid transference. Only now it graced him with the magical pleasure he’d originally come to learn from her. He did not fight the magic as he had before, he only let it gather inside of him, and he completed the exchange by letting the sensation pour back to her.

And when Angrboða sighed, he felt the winds change direction.
They finished together and in the sharp clarity of his bliss he wondered when the unsatisfactory notion of the spell would come to him.

Their breaths slowed and their hearts calmed to keep time with the passing night. They didn’t lie across one another or become a tangle of limbs as he had with his other partners. Angrboða was a distant moon, a precious light made to marvel in the presence of, to feel and worship, but never to hold. In the still silence, Loki queried Angrboða’s origins. She seemed ancient, older than life itself, but she did not strike him as Asgardian. Perhaps it was her magic which was, as strange as it sounded, similar to his.

Sensing his curiosity, she adjusted her position, turning onto her back and facing the glimmering stone ceiling. “Ask me.”

Loki rolled onto his side to watch her face as he openly spoke his mind. “You are not Asgardian, are you?”

“No,” she said after a moment, her dark, bottomless eyes focused on a universe that only she could see.

He waited, hoping that she might break their lover’s silence to tell him a story.

“I first came to Asgard from a world far away,” she murmured with a nostalgic frown. “I can hardly recall the place now, it was never my true home. I was visiting Asgard to help a friend seed her orchard. I was betrothed to a man from my first world and I begged my family at that time to give me a few years of freedom before I was subject to marriage. They agreed and I made up my mind to meet my friend. It was long ago and I have not seen her in an eternity, but we think of each other often.

“We were young and powerful.” Angrboða smiled in memory. “Older than yourself, but not as skilled in magic. We were fools, willing to sacrifice our lives for merriment. We spent years, which then seemed like forever, doing nothing but wasting time and searching for more of it. Eventually, we found more in a long forgotten place. Before then, I had imagined that time was a concept. Little did I know that it is a solid gem in our world.”

Loki gathered a pillow in his arms, stretching his legs behind him to absorb her words. “And being the ignorant youth that we were, we played with it and my friend developed the fruit of our labor. That was her great accomplishment during our travels. Mine was to come soon enough.

“For the final year of our adventures, we ended up staying at an embassy on Nidavellir before I was to return to the man who would be my husband. We drank with the dwarves and they educated us in the art of sculpting and architecture. It was there that I met my beloved.”

His eyebrows pulled into his hairline. “Your beloved was a dwarf?”

She hummed, a happy smile turning up her lips as she closed her eyes. “Yes. We met at a tavern in the capital city. I was ill from too much of the Dwarves’ strong ale and I emptied my stomach onto his boots. But he did not shun me. He was a strong dwarf and he carried me to the nearest inn and nursed my drunken self until I was fully well. His face was the first I saw when I awoke that morning as it would be every morning for the rest of my life.”

Loki tried to picture Angrboða drunk and graceless and found that he could not do it. But the idea entranced him as he listened attentively.

“I fell in love with him in mere seconds and I told him so.” Angrboða blinked at the ceiling, her
face the epitome of sorrow. Loki knew she would have cried if her tears had not already been shed.

“We eloped. I never returned to my old world and we lived as lovers for years to come. My friend
returned to Asgard, matured and prepared to tend to her orchard that we seeded together. She left
the cause of her future prosper in my possession.

“I lived in love. My husband and I owned a mine and a farm of great proportion and we looked
after both by ourselves. We had friends and neighbors and moderate wealth. But mostly we had
love. We were one and the same; he had not taken my heart, rather he became it. We made love
like no two ever had and from that we made a family.” Her long fingered hand trailed from the
skin between her breasts to touch her marked belly. “We made a great family.”

Angrboða opened her eyes again, her eyes were entirely black in the silver night. “Years and years
and years of happiness graced us before that war started over some tiny little world in the middle of
Yggdrasil. I thought all would be fine, but the realms sided with one another, tearing our universe
in two. Even Nidavellir was not safe. My dearest lover knew it was not safe for me when the
armies began settling themselves on my world to kill one another.”

“He and our friends combined their power to change my appearance.” She brought her hands, sable
and striking, before her face, inspecting them as if they were not her own. “Dwarven magic does
not include illusion, but my beloved…the soul of my soul…he begged me to do this to protect
myself.” Her hands fell to her heart. “So I let them change me as he and my children guarded our
home. When I returned to our house, our mine was emptied and the armies had watered our fields
with my family’s precious blood.”

Loki swallowed hard, Angrboða’s ethereal voice wavering with the heat of a tortured divine.

“Angrboða…”

She was too far gone to hear him. “I buried their bodies myself and I took with me their names and
my story that I would keep only for myself, because those cold corpses in the ground of my bloody
land were no longer my home. I only left time behind, for I need not more than I have already. I
only wandered. And after countless years, I came to the heart of that which I never wanted to be a
part of and I watch for change. I teach others love as I have felt it, in hope that their souls might
find homage in another. I wait for the weeds to be pulled from this land and I wait to forgive the
place that took from me everything that I ever loved.”

Her lips parted in a contented sigh. “My grief shall not outlive my mourning, but I will forgive.
And when I have forgiven, I will wander again.”

Loki was awash in sympathy, at a loss for all words. “Angrboða…” he tried again, but she hushed
him, shifting to kiss him softly.

“Sleep, fair prince. This night is too long for you,” she whispered, brushing her hand over his face
and closing his eyes.

Her words trickled magic over his lips and he drank her will with trust he reserved for only one. He
fell asleep at her command and awoke by the absence of the moon.

At sunrise she passed, and Loki knew she would not return until this eternal day had run its course.

He arose from the bed that was no longer Angrboða’s and noticed that the beautiful blue room was
void of black and the balcony facing the rising sun would no longer be for mourning. He
remembered Angrboða like a distant memory, as the essence of her had all but disappeared from
this place.
But her magic and that which she taught him remained. Frowning, he stared at his hands, finally understanding what Amora meant about satisfaction.

He had the potential to love with all that he was, to give pleasure unlike any other and to connect in a way that could not truly be defined by words. He could use the magic as Amora did for casual sensory.

But that was not what Loki wished to do. All this he now had was useless, for he had nobody to love as he so desired.

Heavy with the burden he now carried, Loki faced the Asgardian skyline to see the city grow and change at an accelerated pace, for its beloved mortal gardener was returning today.

Loki watched the sun outshine its distant brothers, trying to grab the day’s attention. He thought of naught but Darcy.

A seed was planted in his mind and had taken root overnight. A rose was yet to grow there, but he knew without a doubt that Darcy would tend to it.

His shadow was the final silhouette of dawn as he turned away, his veins coursing thick with all that he had yet to give.

Satisfaction could wait; he was going home.

***

Darcy stood outside her bedroom door, heart racing, mind frantic with feelings she had no name for.

She had made it through her flight, entertained by the different scenarios of how she might greet Loki.

There was firstly the groveling for forgiveness bit that included a lot of tears and whining. Then there was the tackling hug idea, which was nice.

But it would suck if he rejected her while she was bearing down on him from above.

Finally, she resolved that she would bring a peace offering of duty-free Toblerone to gain his favor. She even put a green ribbon around the prism of delicious chocolate. Loki was a sucker for chocolate, he loved the stuff. Hopefully it would soften him up enough not to hold a grudge against the lie that ended their friendship for a summer.

After he accepted her offering, she would take him in her arms and he would hold her so close that she felt they were one and the same.

Swallowing her fears, Darcy gripped the monster sized Toblerone by its green ribbon and opened the door.

She didn’t even get to see if Loki waiting for her as she was swiftly knocked to the ground by two hyper-enthusiastic animals.

“Frank! Fenrir!” she gasped as they scurried across her body, licking every part of her they could reach. She swore through her laughter, playfully shoving them away so she could sit up and rub their bellies. It was apparent in their excited jitters and noises that they missed her as much as she missed them. “It’s good to see you too,” she said, surprised when her throat felt thick.
Standing up and taking a deep breath, Darcy stepped inside her room.

But there was no moody prince for her to hug and explain how sorry she was. A dreadful emptiness filled her chest.

She made to squeeze the Toblerone box again, but found that it was no longer in her hand. Frank slithered in front of her, his mouth gaping in pure joy. Darcy narrowed her eyes skeptically at him. She wouldn’t put it past her pets to eat a delicious box of chocolaty goodness that fell on the floor.

“Frank—“

Her speech was interrupted by the cockiest voice in all of Yggdrasil. “For future reference, I also enjoy Godiva truffles. However, this will suffice.”

Darcy whipped around so fast she nearly fell over again.

Loki, her Loki, was leaning against the now closed bedroom door and the opened box of Toblerone in his hand was already missing two triangles.

“Damn straight it will,” Darcy breathed; his presence moved her so strongly she felt sick.

Loki didn’t take the time to walk the short distance between them, magicking himself to the space before her, the box of chocolate falling to the ground with a small thud.

No sooner had he materialized than they were in each other’s arms, choking over words that they hadn’t been able to say in their time apart. Loki’s magic flowed through her stronger than ever before and for the millionth time she longed to reciprocate. She wanted him to feel all that she was and know that she loved him every second that they were apart.

It wasn’t just his magic that felt stronger, but his body as well. Even through his new armor, she could tell he’d gotten bigger. His arms were thicker and while his torso was still thin and narrow, he felt wiry.

She twisted her fingers in the hair at the base of his neck, ignoring the cramp in her foot that occurred because she had to stand on her toes to hug him like this. They didn’t even mention their fight and Darcy realized they didn’t need to. There was nothing to say.

When she finally pulled away to meet his eyes, Loki tightened his arms around her waist, keeping them close. “Loki,” she sighed, lightly touching his cheek with her fingertips, “I missed you so much.”

He nodded, bumping their foreheads, his face reflecting her every sentiment. “The next time you spend a summer away, I will be with you.”

Darcy chuckled quietly as Loki flattened his palms on her back, letting her settle down on her heels. She kept her face angled up to his, taking in the shape of his brows and his cheekbones that somehow looked better than the last time they were together. His mouth was in that stupid smirk that never really went away.

Something lighter than air swelled in her chest and inflammatory heat burned in her belly as she felt the faint brush of his peaceful sigh over her lips.

In that moment, Darcy was overwhelmed with the desire to stand on her toes again and kiss Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard, right on his impetuous mouth.
But she didn’t.

She didn’t because she knew by the way he held her and by the beat of her heart that kissing Loki would not be like kissing Sharon. They would not kiss for the sake of kissing.

It would be more. He was Loki after all.

Her revelatory thoughts were interrupted by the sound of crinkling foil and contented noises as Frank and Fenrir dug into Loki’s Toblerone. She wasn’t worried about them eating chocolate; nothing made them sick.

Loki made the most disappointed face and Darcy laughed, unable to help herself. “You didn’t really want that chocolate.”

“It was a gift from you, of course I wanted it.” Loki said with a pout that screamed ‘bullshit’.

She cocked a brow at him, waiting for part two, “Oh really?”

“Certainly,” he affirmed. “I suppose you will have to purchase some more, along with the truffles. And perhaps some of those squares filled with caramel.”

“There it is,” Darcy said, an unstoppable grin meeting her lips as she rolled her eyes and gave him a playful shove.

He caught her hand, entwining their fingers and pulling her back to him. “Darcy?”

“Yes?” she asked, wondering to herself if she’d ever truly appreciated the unearthly depth to Loki’s eyes. They mirrored that depth at the pit of her stomach, making it hard for her to breathe. But in a good way. She cleared her throat to tame the sensation.

Loki touched her face and squeezed her hand. “Would you be comfortable returning to the palace? You need not if you do not wish it. But I do ask that you see Hel. She misses you terribly.”

Darcy nodded. She no longer felt the overwhelming need to have control. She was no longer desperate to figure everything out. Puzzles must be solved at different paces and she need not rush to fit the pieces together.

“Yes,” she told him with enough sincerity for him to know that she was not in the state she had left in. “I miss Asgard and Hel. Is she alright?”

Loki chuckled. “Currently she hates me. Your return should rectify that. But there is something else that is quite horrible,” he said, waving a hand to cast her double.

“Yeah?” Darcy questioned, acknowledging what her double’s butt looked like from the back. If one thing had changed over the summer, that was it. Cuz damn, her ass looked fine.

“Yes,” he confirmed, tugging her down and placing a kiss on the inside of her wrist. “I have not had chocolate for an entire summer and--”

Darcy elbowed him in the side as they slid under her bed. “Oh god, just get over it.”

***

Thor was convinced Sif was angry with him.

He didn’t know why she did or when it started, but she hardly even looked at him anymore. And
when she did, it was almost with contempt. Other times, she seemed to forget that she hated him and she would punch him affectionately or make a friendly jest at his expense.

That night he’d intended to bring to her attention her behavior and ask if he’d done anything wrong, but she wasn’t even there for Darcy’s return. His mother had organized a banquet at the heart of the city where nobles and commoners alike could talk and greet Darcy. Thor didn’t know much about what Darcy did, but everyone knew her. Children tugged at her skirts and she greeted them by name; she met with farmers and merchants and bankers and lords and ladies.

But she did not greet Sif because Sif wasn’t there.

Sif, one of Darcy’s good friends, was not there to welcome her home. Neither did Sigyn attend, which Thor was also disappointed by. Should they not be supporting their friend?

He thought perhaps Sigyn might think it better of her status not to prance with roughens…but Sif? Was she ill? Was she tired? He did not know what was happening, but he did not like it.

So, after greeting Darcy, who he was, despite all his jests, glad to have back and teasing Loki about the date of their future wedding, he set off to find Sif. He intended to resolve this rift between them before they ceased to be friends.

Most of the military was out in the city, enjoying the festivities and drinking with friends and he knew the barrack where they slept would be empty. Sif slept there out of pride. He’d offered her shelter in the palace, even if they were servant’s quarters, she would have her own space that wasn’t in the same room as twenty or so men. But she had given up her title to sleep in that room with those men. She would never accept his help.

That was the strong-willed attitude he befriended her for in the first place.

He made it to the barracks, walking along the corridors until he found Sif’s sector. Uncertainly, he opened the door, peering through the dark at the rows of cots.

As silently as possible, Thor eased inside, stepping deeper into the darkness and he began to hear noises. Perhaps it was a whisper. Perhaps Sif was sleeping and she was dreaming.

He approached Sif’s bed that was marked with her number and noticed that it was occupied.

Gently, he reached out and tapped what he thought might be her shoulder. “Sif.”

Someone gasped and Thor’s eyes adjusted well enough to realize that there was not only one body in Sif’s bed, but two. There was a great deal of thrashing about under the covers and Thor heard Sif swear multiple times. He recovered from his initial shock, a jest taking its place.

“Ha! Sif! You accuse me of succumbing to the temptation of flesh and yet you have taken a man…” he trailed off as the sheets were whipped away to reveal Sif, garbed in a linen shift, flat on her back with a pained look of horror on her face, and straddled by none other than his bride to be, dressed in Sif’s tunic and her blonde hair mussed.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

“Thor.” Sif held up her hands defensively as Sigyn crossed her arms in annoyance. “I can explain.”
This chapter took forever to write. I got stuck a few times because all the characters just kept getting into sticky situations.
*wink*
Okay, so bad jokes aside, allow me to just say that late October/early November are the busiest times for me. Pardon the delay.
I don't know if you've noticed, but I kind of have a thing for awesome female characters. And, I don't just mean female characters who beat stuff up or do awesome science, I mean strong female characters that have the potential to make a story interesting. And with this chapter that strong female character vibe strangled me in the best of ways and after I drafted everything for Darcy's Culver life, I just couldn't change it.
Sharon Carter and Betty Ross are important characters to the story. Just so you know, I didn't put them in here for shits and giggles. They have purpose.
Also, this fic is not a supporter of Bruce/Nat. This fic has an aversion to GreenSpiders. This fic believes that Bruce and Betty were a thing and that we're just going to keep it that way because the author really likes that ship. This fic is its own entity as well.

Now, allow me to make something perfectly clear:
I, Q_it of AO3, fanfic writer, shipper of Tasertricks and tumblr abuser, have never hired a prostitute. I've never been to a brothel. I don't even know any prostitutes, unfortunately. Therefore, Asgardian prostitution is a fantastical thing. I made it up based on the ideal land of prostitution where one has the right to sell their own body without the risk of STDs and pregnancy because the government supports the prevention of that and the right to have sex with whoever without violence.

I'm pretty sure this is implied in the fic, but age works very differently on Asgard and, like, every realm other than Earth. Loki is nearing the end of his adolescence. He's young, but it isn't a very big deal to Asgard. He and Thor got put in charge of stomping out a rebellion when Loki and Darcy were 12. To most Aesir, Loki is already an adult. He has about two or three years left and that's a very small amount of time for Aesir. Henceforth, everyone can have a great time and do the do.


One more thing.
This chapter was difficult for me to write and that is because I have made the decision to take an unconventional approach to the characterizations of Loki and Darcy and the universe they're in. This fic is supes AU. Many fics portray Loki to be a very embittered character. He's proud, arrogant, smart... I've kept those things to an extent. However, there are some aspects of Loki's typical characterization that wouldn't make sense on the route I'm taking.

Loki isn't lonely. Loki isn't as much of an outcast. Loki isn't completely alone in the
world. He has Darcy. Because of this, I believe that it would make Loki more inclined to associate with...like...people. He's a teenage guy, he's a bit of an ass, he values his solitude, he's a persuasive public speaker and he's got a massive soft spot for his best friend. So, yes, Loki is...well...Loki, but he isn't bitter yet. The bitterness comes later. :)

Which brings me to the sex.
I know it was unexpected. But I am determined to keep it. If I had more time, this chapter would have been huge. I could have written a book for this chapter. But I'm busy af, so I didn't do that. Sex in the story so far has not been important and I had no need to mention it at all. Do Loki and Darcy have lust? Duh. They're teenagers, of course they have lust. But it hasn't been necessary to include that. And, while sex was an element in this chapter, it was not the focus or the most important part.

Part of the chapter extension I deleted because I felt it was just excess stuff was a bit added on to Loki and Darcy's growing up. It is hard, do not get me wrong, I am struggling to make two very close characters grow up from being children. And this was a very quick step forwards as far as Loki goes, but I stand by it. I did write an entire three or four sentences (so many) in which Loki explains that he's curious and stuff.

Even so, I wouldn't say that means Loki is a sex-driven maniac. It's not so much the sexiness as it is Loki discovering new magic, meeting strange important new characters, and sulking in the company of people who are in just as much pain as he is over not having the one they love.

This chapter follows a philosophy that does not extol sex. It's important, yeah. So is chocolate. But the purpose of the sex was not to show Loki as some crazed, lusty individual. My intent was to use intercourse as a transference to Loki newly seeing the world and a representation of sexual freedom. For the prostitutes, not Loki. Loki's a white male, he doesn't have to worry about that shit.

Boom. Notes. Thank you all for reading and I love you all!!
Darcy strode down one of the lengthier palace corridors, making her way to a very important meeting with an individual she had not seen for quite some time now.

It was unfortunate for her that she had not spent as much time thinking of them as she should have, for all of her brain-space was, as of late, being hoarded by the greedy mental presence of her prince. Darcy didn’t think she could ever hate someone as much as she loved them, but Loki was getting pretty close.

He was her annoying, tall, frustrating, dark, skinny, handsome, annoying, nerdy, annoying little shit.

He’d changed over the summer. It wasn’t a bad change; in fact, Darcy would dare to call it a good change. He was more relaxed, he ate more, he left the library at least twice a day without her asking him to, and he’d physically grown a lot.

Not to mention, he trained with Thor almost every day and they didn’t wear shirts when they wrestled.

At first, Darcy refused to watch said fights for fear of an unfair struggle where Thor pulverized her prince. Well, she couldn’t say that didn’t happen because by the end of their matches, Loki looked like he’d been through Helheim. But Thor came out equally as thrashed. Throughout their matches, Loki held his own.
What Thor had in mass and strength, Loki made up for in dexterity and flexibility. It seemed it was a fairly even contest, so Darcy consented to watch.

The only problem was that they didn’t stop until one of them was unable to go on for whatever reason and there weren’t any rules in their matches so long as they didn’t use weapons.

After ten minutes of two extremely attractive, shirtless, cut, shirtless, sweaty, shirtless space princes beating each other to a pulp, Darcy was convinced they were aiming for a violent murder.

Eventually (an hour later), Loki triumphed because he did everyone watching the fight either a huge favor or massive disgrace by yanking Thor’s trousers down and gathering him in a dangerous looking headlock while he tried to pull his pants back up.

Darcy would have slapped that smug little smirk off Loki’s impertinent mouth for almost dying in hand-to-hand combat with his brother, but she didn’t for the following three reasons:

1. Loki was really tired from almost being killed by Thor
2. Loki was in a lot of pain from almost being killed by Thor
3. Loki was so god damned attractive with sweat all over his body and dirt and even that dried trickle of blood from his mouth where he’d bit the inside of his cheek was so hot that she couldn’t really form words until he was properly dressed and she wasn’t distracted by how his pants hung on his hips. Was that even a thing an individual could be attracted to? Assuming that she was attracted to Loki which she totally wasn’t.

All dangerous brotherly love aside, there was only one thing that really bothered Darcy about Loki. And that was his propensity to make-out with every single lady on Asgard.

Darcy didn’t know exactly what he’d gotten up to over the summer, but she had the feeling that it was more than just getting his ass beat by Thor every day because pre-summer Loki would never dare to openly disrespect his own title to kiss fucking Lorelei in the middle of the fucking dance floor of a fucking ball to fucking honor the fucking ambassadors of fucking Vanaheim.

But it wasn’t just Lorelei. He couldn’t just stop there. No no. She had seen him make out with thirty-six ladies just within the past three months. Not that she was counting or anything. She wouldn’t even think to do that.

The kiss with Lorelei was the most public thing she’d seen him do. The other times it was almost as if he were setting himself up to get caught.

Two weeks ago there had been a meeting with the head of Asgard’s judicial branch. Odin and the First Einherjar planned the date in order to discuss a change in sentencing war criminals. At the time of the Great War, any war criminals would have just been killed. But they were making amendments to practice imprisonment. For some reason it seemed less civilized to kill a Vanir over their wrongs than a Jotunn.

Darcy had been invited to the meeting by Lord Solt Jegleson, the judicial leader. It surprised Darcy because she rarely agreed with Lord Solt, but they liked each other nonetheless. Solt might have been one of the most competent people running Asgard and while she did spend a fair amount of time bickering with him about whether or not Asgard should revive the creation of weapons made to kill Frost Giants, they were both open enough in their beliefs that they would take the time to acknowledge that the other’s reasoning was well founded.

That’s why she was invited. Odin and the Einherjar and Solt all thought in similar patterns. Darcy
had an opposing view and Solt figured they needed that.

Well, Darcy had showed up to the meeting early, as she usually did, just to run over her arguments and to prepare to speak with Odin (the guy gave her migraines). But when she opened the door to the conference room, Loki was there.

With Lady Jagala.

And their faces were stuck together.

Playing tonsil hockey.

Darcy had frozen in the doorway, completely unsure of what to do. Should she get mad? Run? Apologize and close the door? Loki only smiled at her like it was any other day as Lady Jagala fled from the room, embarrassed. He teased Darcy lightly about always being early and she poked his belly, his jests bringing her out of shock.

It was the first time she had accidentally caught Loki in the act and every time things played out the same. When they made plans to meet in the gardens, her seeking him out in the library, even in certain meeting rooms she was partial to, Loki always managed to be there with some lady. It was if his flirty escapades were made for her to witness.

Even so, Darcy maintained her cool.

It didn’t hurt to see him kiss all of those women. Why would it? Darcy and Loki were friends. Just friends. They’d always been just friends. She might have thought she had some interest in him at one point, but it was just a phase brought on by, most likely, her lusty teenage hormones.

So, she remained indifferent. Loki could kiss whoever he wanted. Fine by her. He could just keep doing that and she would sit by like a good little Advisor and take care of his public image which was quickly turning to shit because of the sheer amount of lip-locking he was partaking in on a daily basis.

The Asgardian public couldn’t really pin him on anything because the only proof they had that he’d actually been with any of the ladies was the witnesses’ accounts of him kissing Lorelei. He was discreet; Darcy being the only one to catch him at it. The reality of his actions were a mystery to everyone but him; it was the rumors that were horrific.

What could be worse than Darcy walking in on Loki with his tongue in some girl’s mouth and their hands in his pretty dark hair?

What could be worse is hearing about it every god damned time she had to communicate with the ladies about anything. Usually they didn’t talk about such trivial things like who Loki was interested in, mostly because Loki had never really fancied anyone but Sigyn. Suffice to say, that ship had sailed.

But they were talking to her now. They gossiped and tittered over every little inkling that Loki had done something (or someone). Even if they had no proof, even if there had been no witness or verification, Prince Loki was every whisper of the wind, taunting her wherever she went.

And just when Darcy thought that she had heard it all, she walked into the ladies’ chambers one day to hear Lady Volla chattering quietly with a group of ladies about how good Loki was in bed. Darcy could recall Volla’s exact words: “Silvertongue indeed. By the gods, my legs are still shaking. I have never experienced so much pleasure in all my life.”
Loki had sex.

What?

With Lady Volla?

Why? When? How? All of these things were happening and she just didn’t know how to ask him without him thinking that she had feelings for him or something dumb like that. She didn’t. Yet, it made her feel dumb and icky on the inside when he didn’t even tell her that he had experience doing ‘the do’.

Loki never said anything to her about it. Not that she wanted to kiss Loki or anything. What a ridiculous notion.

She ignored Loki’s behavior as best she could, but it was a bit difficult to do when her job was to be his secretary/personal assistant/publicist/advisor/representative/manager. While she did do a great deal more with her political position on Asgard, her first tasks always involved managing Prince Loki’s life. Usually she liked it. She made Loki look good and helped him to be successful.

But it was really hard to fucking get that done when he was busy wetting his dick in every broad that ever gave him a sideways glance.

Sure almost everything that went around was a rumor, but as far as the media was concerned, a few rumors were all it took to sour the entire public image of Loki she’d worked to create.

Finally, it had reached the point where she was no longer able to do anything unless the rumors were to suddenly stop and Darcy was forced to write up a report and give it to Frigga.

Darcy wrote reports about all of the royals just to keep a personal file of their different public images at different points in time. Usually it was Thor that Darcy had to bring his parent’s attention to. And while Thor had been in worse situations (i.e. getting caught fornicating behind a tavern), Loki was causing more trouble.

As far as social standards went, Thor could get away with partying in the long run. He was still young and by the time he gets married and has kids, it would all be forgotten. He was a prince. It was expected that he go and ‘gain experience’ before settling down. Loki, however, was breaking every god damn conformity of the Asgardian higher class community. Yes, it was almost tradition for ladies of the court to try and have clandestine rich lovers. Emphasis on ‘clandestine’.

Darcy knew Loki; he could hide anything from anyone for as long as he wanted to. If Asgard suspected that he was fucking around with ladies of the court, it was because he wanted them to know.

Not only that, but ladies were typically very strict on keeping the pretense that they were virginal. It was stupid how the higher class still kept ‘virtue’ and ‘virginity’ as synonymous notions. Acting innocent in the sexual sense was of value in a public setting, so it was shocking, to say the least, that Loki has charmed as many women as the rumors claimed he had. Such extreme circumstances implied to the realm that Loki’s Silvertongue was good for a great many things.

Loki had turned himself into Asgard’s bad-boy and number one womanizer.

Darcy hadn’t been watching him go about his business, absolutely not. It wasn’t her fault that every time she went to go see him somewhere she found him in one compromising position or another. At least she never caught him with his pants down.
But if she had been watching, she would have seen that Loki kissed like he wanted to be seen. No one uses tongue in semi-public unless they want to be seen. Darcy should know; she had gone through the foreseeable phase of PDA. However, she hadn’t done this in a fucking palace where people’s titles were on the line.

Darcy couldn’t care less how much tongue Loki used or how nice his lips looked or how none of those ladies knew that Loki has a mole on his back just below his shoulder blade. Darcy knew about the mole and they didn’t. Therefore, she won.

Only she didn’t feel like a winner. Instead she got the feeling that Loki was kissing all of those ladies just to make her insides squirm.

She wished he would talk about it. Occasionally, at night when they were in bed, Darcy getting ready to sleep and Loki staying up to fool around with whatever magic he liked to work on in the wee hours of the morning, she would begin to ask him what was going on. But every time it was like he was expecting it, like he wanted her to say something and acknowledge the fact that he was swapping spit with all of Asgard.

Blame it on her stubbornness, but Darcy wasn’t about to give him that satisfaction. Let him do what he wanted; it was fine by her.

Of course, it would be easier to say that if things between them weren’t so erratic.

One moment they would be sitting in her bed, bickering about whatever, and the next they’d be lost in the presence of the other. She would be in the middle of a sentence and his eyes would steal her words, the unearthly green alight with a wondrous glow, as if she was some mystic faerie who’d put him under her spell. Darcy didn’t need a mirror to know that his expression reflected her own.

And then the moment would pass. Darcy would finish her sentence and Loki would smirk like the little shit he was, reminding her that all was normal.

Even so, some parts of their relationship were not as they had been. Taking his arm at feasts, as was customary being that she was his advisor, now sent shivers down her spine. Searching him out in a crowd and finding him looking for her spawned a kaleidoscope of butterflies in her stomach. When he kissed her face, the light press of his lips to her temple or forehead brought so much blood to her ears that it hurt.

But, out of everything, their sleeping arrangement, which had always been a unique and important part of their relationship, remained the same; the warm, comforting feeling of being exactly where she was supposed to be hadn’t changed.

Darcy could hardly remember when she and Loki started sleeping together, but they always kept the same unspoken bed rules. Loki’s side of the bed was near the wall and Darcy’s was at the edge so that she could easily get up to dress for school. Darcy could admit she was a bit of a bed-hog. They fell asleep with equally proportioned sides of the bed and by morning Loki was usually huddled near the wall while she dominated the bedding.

Despite what the romance books might say, bed-sharing was more like a trusting partnership. It was rare that she and Loki ever fell asleep or woke up in any kind of embrace. For Darcy, having Loki in her bed, sleeping beside her, was safety. He was her home. The warm, secure feeling was a fragrant tea that steeped in her hot blood, creating, over time, a Loki-shaped stain on her very core.

Their sleeping arrangements had not changed, and, thankfully, neither had their cuddling.
Nothing had changed physically. No matter how irritated Darcy was with his mysterious romances, she couldn’t bring herself to give up that part of their relationship.

They still spent their mornings huddled together and Darcy had long since learned how to avoid encounters with the part of Loki that typically made itself known in the morning. She was a big girl, she knew how anatomy worked. Sometimes she sat in his lap and he would tell her to move. She would apologize and scoot further down on his thighs. Other times they might be cuddling and he might shift a little so she wasn’t being poked.

But something was different.

Maybe it was how his voice had gotten deeper, or how he smelled…but something about him made her heart race and her gut clench.

It was probably just him being annoying because Darcy did not like Loki…like that. At all.

Taking a deep breath, Darcy made to clear her thoughts of Loki for the time being. There were more important matters on the table.

The predicted war with Vanahem was becoming more apparent. For the first time in Vanir history there was conflict between the two sides of Vanahem culture. The tribes were making demands of the capital cities and the cities were nearing their wits end. According to reports sent in from Queen Freya, the tribes wanted representation in Vanahem nobility and recognition from the Asgardian throne.

To get this recognition, they were threatening a war.

Darcy had done the math; if even a third of the tribal communities gathered together to fight, their forces would outnumber the Vanir capital’s by a thousand. The long-standing treaty between Asgard and Vanahem proclaimed that should there be a war that the realm could not face alone, then its sister-realm would intervene.

The issue with this resolution was that the tribes were a vast and fundamental constituent of the Vanir population. There was much debate over which side of the conflict Asgard would aid. A separate party was even forming to deny both sides aid and fight for peace, the tribes and the capital individually.

Darcy was undecided. Her opinion didn’t carry any weight in external affairs. That was a downside to being an Advisor; she had near unlimited power on Asgard, but she wasn’t considered to be anymore than Loki’s glorified servant to the rest of Yggdrasil. The only acknowledgment she received from the other realms was that Asgard’s second prince was sweet on his little helper.

It annoyed her beyond even Loki’s interactions with ladies of the court.

She hated how everything she did was under Loki’s name. Her title, her work, her successes, her failures, they were all due to him. She wouldn’t even be in any position at all if it weren’t for him. It wasn’t his fault and the irritation had no effect on how she felt about her friend. Even so, the thought hovered around her like a gnat to a bowl of fruit.

It was senseless to dwell on her restrictions. She was a mortal girl assisting in politics on a realm far greater than any world she’d ever known before meeting Loki.

Then again, there wasn’t a whole lot that happened before she met Loki.

Through the memories of their growing friendship, Darcy could reminisce on the development of
her intelligence.

Their childhood blunders on Muspelheim and the befriending of a Galaxy Dragon, one of the rarest creatures in the universe, reminded her that at the time she hadn’t known the weight of her actions. Every fantastic thing she and Loki had accomplished back then seemed distant. Only now was she beginning to realize the weight of what she’d done. As a child, she had blown off Asgard’s alliance with Muspelheim as a neat little effect of their survival. The impossibility of their achievements was so insignificant to her at the time.

But the same was true for much of what she and Loki had discovered.

The Norn’s rebellion, her first taste of Asgardian political strife, she’d often remembered as simply an introduction into court life and friendship with Sif.

But as she continued to delve into her memories of that day, Darcy found herself both confused and awed by the events that had occurred. Everything from those two days was like a puzzle she’d assembled wrong with several missing pieces.

Most of this chaos was centered around the weird bearded lord she was to meet with today.

Darcy approached the doors of the conference room she’d reserved for this meeting. Two guards framed the entrance, bowed their heads to her as she neared them. She was always flattered by the gesture, sometimes it even made her uncomfortable. If kneeling was ultimate submission, then head-bowing was a display of great respect. No one was required or expected to bow to her. She wasn’t a royal or a lady really. She wasn’t even a noble. She was Loki’s advisor with no other glory to her name.

She smiled, recognizing the men almost immediately. “How’s the knee, Ergil? All healed up yet?” she asked, causing the other warrior, Fell, to snort. Last week, Ergil had been teaching a hand-to-hand combat lesson to Sif’s legion. He was a fair instructor, strong at the very least. The poor guy had decided to spar with Sif and she had him surrendering within minutes. Still, there was a point in the middle of their fight when he had her pinned to the ground. So, when Ergil stood up, clumsily making his way to across the courtyard, he unfortunately walked in front of the archers’ targets, effectively allowing for one of Sigyn’s arrows to be imbedded in his knee.

“Bad luck for him, Advisor Darcy,” Fell chortled at the withering look Ergil was sending him. “Lady Sigyn hardly practices any more. He went and romped right in front of her target! Unfortunate accident, that one!”

Darcy laughed with him, patting a sour Ergil comradely on the shoulder, sincerely doubting that the shot was too much of an accident. Sigyn probably hadn’t meant to hurt him so severely, but Darcy had reason to suspect that her ‘misfire’ was due to Ergil’s interest in Sif. “Well, be thankful it was a bone that can be fixed,” Darcy told him with a cheeky grin.

Fell laughed harder and Ergil joined in as well. “Advisor Darcy, he is a fool. He deserved to be shot. It was his hope to impress Sif with his skill and yet she beat him as if he was no more than a misbehaving child.”

“Aye, tis the truth. And had you any sense, Fell, you would be battling for her favor. A woman like that is a rare one indeed,” Ergil responded, getting a bit misty eyed and Darcy struggled to keep in her hysterias. She wasn’t about to tell the guy that Sif had no interest in men, but it was cute to see all his false hopes.

“Men,” Darcy addressed them, calming down enough to speak evenly. “I bid you well, but if you
do not open this door soon, I’m afraid I’ll be late for my meeting.”

“Of course, Advisor Darcy,” Fell said cheerily, squaring his shoulders and returning to his position, “and might I add that you look absolutely lovely this evening?”

Ergil was back in position as well, rolling his eyes. “Fell, you dog, Advisor Darcy has better tastes than the likes of you.”

“I was only being honest to the striking lady,” Fell said, winking at her and she shook her head at him in humored exasperation as they opened the doors for her.

The warrior had a point, she looked damn fine that evening. Her hair was pulled back, small jeweled clips pinning it away from her face. She’d told Hilda, her friend and hand-maiden, she wanted to look dangerous but also super gorgeous. After this meeting she had a quick, private dinner with Loki and the High Lord of Ringsfjord.

She stepped inside, her head held high as she cleared the last traces of her conversation with the guards from her mind.

Her favorite conference room was closer to the ground and it overlooked a part of Frigga’s massive garden. It was very open and a large gold arch led out onto a balcony. A fire was lit in the grand fireplace and the round table in the center of the room was unoccupied.

Instead her rival stood by the window, as golden and confusing as ever he was.

High Lord Bjarte stood like a childhood memory. So much had happened since their first meeting and even that brief look at him in Odin’s study. This was her first time seeing him through matured eyes and she saw that the puzzle she had solved as a child was far from completed. His immediate presence reinforced in her mind the importance of this meeting.

He turned to her and it irked Darcy that his beard was still weird. “Advisor Darcy, it is an honor to be summoned by your ladyship.”

Under normal circumstances, Darcy would subtly tell whoever she was meeting with that she preferred to lose the niceties. But she refrained. She’d been playing this ridiculous game, bouncing her mind between Frigga’s expectations and Lord Bjarte’s looming threat. It was time she finally had some say in the rules.

“High Lord Bjarte, I’m glad you could accept my invitation on such short notice,” she greeted, keeping her distance. She didn’t ask him to sit or even call forth an attendant with tea. Her every cell was focused on him and the recollection of their game of Hnefatafl all those years ago, the game with which she’d won Loki’s honor and the secret of her identity. And along with that, she’d come out of the Lord’s library with leverage she often forgot about.

At the time Loki had told her that the magic she felt when Lord Bjarte attempted to cheat was also a bind to their gamble. Since she won the game, she had magical influence over the High Lord. At least, she would if she could use magic.

Standing before Bjarte now, Darcy could not be sure if that magic had any weight. It seemed ridiculous that any Lord would bargain his own control when playing a child. Especially when cheating against a child. Then again, he probably hadn’t expected her to win.

But she had. She had won.

“Of course,” he said with a small smile, clasping his hands behind his back, emphasizing the bold,
gold color of his clothes. “I was expecting some message from you soon. With the war with Vanaheim upon us, I assumed it was only a matter of time.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “You know very well, Lord Bjarte, that I have no influence over external affairs.”

“Ah,” he said waving his finger at her as if scolding a child. His eyes were cold, leering and the lines of his face, obscured by his beard, were mocking. “I disagree, Advisor Darcy. I would say that you have monumental influence over external affairs. It is simply that your words carry no weight.”

Her jaw clenched as the bitter reminder of her reliance on her restricted position. Her words only mattered through other’s mouths. She didn’t bother to smile. This game had to have one honest player. “Your refute is founded,” she told him, gesturing to the table. “Sit.”

“Well, only because you asked so nicely,” Lord Bjarte mocked; taking a seat nonetheless, the light of the day caught his beard in the light of the setting sun as he scrutinized her. “You are older now, growing up as they say.”

“I am an adolescent. Aging is a necessary side effect of growth,” she sassed politely, taking her seat on the other side of the table. They were close enough that she could see the details of his glare without her glasses, but far enough away that she couldn’t stretch her arm out across the table to poke him.

High Lord Bjarte’s bushy eyebrows rose. “No. You are becoming formidable and a worthy opponent.”

Darcy didn’t want to wait around while he evaluated her, but she knew that his game with Vanaheim extended beyond the realm. He’d wanted this war for years now and Darcy could only see part of the grand scheme. She saw no motive, no gain of power, no reason for fighting Vanaheim.

Her cluelessness was proof she was searching in all the wrong places. If the answer did not lie in his actions, it was waiting in the space between them, dangling right above her head.

He kept talking like he had all of the knowledge she could ever hope to attain. “But you are still a child, a girl. You keep secrets that you do not even bother to understand. You scorn with a tongue that has never been burned. You scowl when you have never been angry and you write without the urgency of a ruler. You have more power than any common girl could ever hope for and you crave more.”

Lord Bjarte paused, leaning forwards a bit as Darcy glared at him, unphased. She waited, letting him insult her. This meeting was made for her to listen and listen she would. She needed materials to create her success.

“And yet they all love you,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “Perhaps they find your ignorance charming. Or perhaps they just like that you have taken their prince’s heart in your hot little hands.”

“Tell me, Advisor Darcy,” Lord Bjarte said, his eyes boring into hers with curious intensity. “Is it cold?”

She returned with an unrepressed glower, “Is what cold?”

“His heart?” he asked quietly and suddenly the room seemed too still. “Is he a monster, Advisor Darcy?”
If Darcy was puzzled before, she was oblivious now. She answered him even so. “No more than you or I.”

One of his knobby knuckled hands went to his beard, stroking it thoughtfully. “I repeat myself by saying you have grown, but very little.”

“And you haven’t grown at all,” Darcy countered bitingly. “You lost, remember?”

Bjarte didn’t miss a beat. “Indeed. How could I forget? I was beaten by a child at my own game. We cheated our way to the end and in return, you gained something from me that none other ever has.”

Darcy bit back surprise. The truth still held then, that she had some power over him? Whatever could it entail?

The bearded man stood, sending a honey-sweet gust of air in Darcy’s direction. She struggled not to choke over the nauseating scent. He walked to her side, eyes exuding contempt; it was a challenge she accepted with only a glance. “I will be direct with you just this once, ‘Advisor’ Darcy.”

His palms slammed down on the table before her and she flinched in shock.

“Had you been a Vanir sorceress or an elf or a dwarf with a pretty face, you would know the answers to the questions burning in that little mind of yours. Had you even the slightest magical potential as an Aesir, the Allmother would have you be the vigilant hero who keeps her secrets. If you knew anything about magic, that little gamble would have meant something.” He leaned in closer, the sickly sweet spit of bees making her head spin. “But you do not. You are magically impotent.”

Darcy sat up straighter in her chair and Lord Bjarte retreated, buzzing around the room as an idle threat. “So I can’t do magic. What’s your point?”

He chuckled, twisting one of his beard’s many braids between his forefinger and thumb. “I want a fair fight, Advisor Darcy.”

“Horse shit,” she spat. In any political circumstance, she would have washed her mouth out with soap and never shown her face in public ever again. But, despite her cool façade, it wasn’t all that great to have someone call you stupid consistently. “Fair game is your enemy.”

“Fair game gives me wide berth to ply my craft,” he countered offhandedly. “Though perhaps you are right. You brought me here to answer your questions; I will do so in part.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. Could he be any more of a dick? Bjarte ignored this and continued on. “Is it not humorous to think that the two of you aid each other’s disability? If one of you were to fall, the other could not stand.”

“You’re very dramatic. You know that, right?” Even as she dropped her pleasant demeanor in favor of representing her own feelings on the matter, she listened to what he was saying, searching for the truth.

“Indeed,” he said agreeably, turning towards her, seeping malcontent. “But I am also honest in saying that even the bare thought, the idea, of your precious prince with a golden arrow through his heart—”

Darcy gasped before she could stop herself, her hand going to her own heart that had stuttered at
the memory of Loki’s almost-assassination. Even her time away couldn’t cure her worry over that. It didn’t bear down on her at all times like it had before, but it made her everything ache.

“—pains you.” Lord Bjarte continued as she had proved his honesty.

“You sent the killer,” Darcy stated, standing up to better equate their height, which she still couldn’t do after all these years.

High Lord Bjarte smiled like a child whose parents told him that all vegetables were to be replaced with desserts for the next year. “You would like that, wouldn’t you? I admit nothing, Advisor Darcy.”

She took a step towards him, radiating rage. She could have him arrested on the spot…she could cut that beard right off his face. “You don’t need to.”

Again, he waved his finger at her, degrading ever shred of power she ever pretended to own. “As I said, Advisor Darcy, fair game, law and order, rules… they are my vice. You are not one of the bloodthirsty warriors that walk these halls. You won’t kill me in your anger.”

“I won’t?” Darcy asked innocently, making sure to sound extra disappointed. Of course, she didn’t have any weapons on her, so unless she wanted to try for the ‘bare hands’ route, it wouldn’t be the best. “Damn.”

Lord Bjarte acted as though she had not spoken, stepping around her to reach the door. “You will play fair.”

Darcy gaped at him, disbelieving. “Exsqueeze me? I cheated for him once before, what makes you think I won’t do it again?”

“Because,” Lord Bjarte said, pulling open one of the grand, golden doors to the outside hall. “You now keep their secrets. And one does not wish to spill wine while wearing white.”

On that lovely note, the bane of her very existence exited the room and Darcy had half a mind to make like Ms. Scarlet in the Hall with the Candlestick and beat his ass.

But she didn’t.

She didn’t know what he was up to yet. There would be consequences to his immediate death. Also, Darcy didn’t really like the idea of killing anyone. So there was that.

Sighing, scrubbed a hand over her face. She would have to think on all this later, for now she had dinner with Loki and Sir Whatshisface from Ringsfjord.

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The Next Morning…

Loki sat at a table in one of his mother’s rooms, staring down at a carefully constructed report of his recent social life that had been published to the Asgardian people.

And it was unflattering to say the least.

“Loki,” the Allmother said firmly, sitting across from him with a look of disappointment that had the power to make his soul shrivel, “you know I hate to sound like your father but you, my son, are a Prince of Asgard and as a Prince of Asgard, you cannot go about displaying such affections with
ladies of the court as you have this past season.”

Loki grimaced as he thought back to his more risqué escapades and the numerous rumors he’d spread about himself.

The night of Darcy’s return from Culver, she and Loki curled up together in his bed and talked. He made the decision not to tell her about his adventures at the brothel. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her to know, he did. But he did not want his summer experiences to interfere with their relationship. He feared that if Darcy knew of everything he’d done with prostitutes, she would believe he expected things of her while they shared a bed.

Sleeping with Darcy was one of the most chaste and beautiful parts of his life. And while Darcy was gorgeous and, he must admit, quite alluring, she was his friend. He did not think that any amount of sex either of them had would change the nature of their relationship.

Even so, he felt Darcy should know about his summer, for no other reason than she was his friend and it was a large part of his life. He resolved he would tell her...eventually. Perhaps not that day, or the next. But he would at some point in time.

Instead he chose to relay stories of his and Thor’s training experience. She kicked him in the shin when he recalled the many beatings he received from Mjolnir.

Then she told him about Culver, the book she had written, and the Idiot Girl that had become the bane of his existence.

Loki didn’t have feelings for Darcy. That was a ridiculous notion. He loved her, of course, but only as his friend. If he were to be asked again whether or not he was in love with Darcy Lewis, he would answer ‘no’ without a second thought. It must have simply been the heat of the summer that drove him to believe otherwise.

He could not like Darcy like that. He never had hopes that they could be together or that they might dance together for once. He hadn’t imagined kissing her sweet pouty lips or hearing her say that she was in love with him and that she was his and he was hers. Those thoughts never even crossed his mind. Not once.

She would never want to be with him anyways; she liked women.

It was immediately after she told him about her ‘fling’ with Idiot Girl that Loki made up his mind; if Darcy could be in relationships and kiss women, so could he.

And kiss women he did. He made sure that Darcy was there to see that he too was capable of being with women that were not her and that he didn’t have feelings for her in the slightest. Loki went out of his way to make it crystal clear that he was not in love with her by flirting with ladies of the court and accepting their advances, letting them cling to him as if they were courting.

Loki had spent a great deal of time with prostitutes, but ladies of the Asgardian court were another breed of whore entirely. They weren’t like his friends at the brothel; they didn’t have sex for fun or love or pleasure or friendship or even money. They weren’t trained to give pleasure.

They were trained to gain the hand of those wealthier than themselves.

Their forwardness towards him was only for power and titles. As the only eligible prince, Loki had no shortage of women lining up to be his potential bedmate. The higher class rejected ideas of intercourse before marriage; therefore everything was to be discreet. Gossip spread around in hushed whispers about who had spent the night where, but such events never went public. It was
common, unspoken knowledge that the virginal ladies of the court fucked the lord with the heaviest coin purse.

‘Act innocent, play dirty,’ Sigyn had told him as a summary of her expectations as a lady nearing adulthood. He knew she was with Sif, a penniless military woman, so her situation was especially difficult since she was engaged to the most powerful bachelor in all of Asgard. With all of her intolerant will, Loki could not see Sigyn acting like anyone but herself and he definitely could not see her ‘playing dirty’ with Thor. He was proud of how her confidence had grown in the past few years; she owed it to herself to be exactly who she was and nothing but.

As for the rumors, he’d started most of them himself. He was a liesmith, surely he could forge a few tall tales about the women he’d been with. There were even a few stories he managed to spread about relationships with men. He was not limited to simply one sex as most sad individuals were; his options were expansive since nearly everyone was in the realm of his attraction. Let Darcy make what she would of that.

Loki had hardly participated in as many escapades as he’d led on. He only ever demonstrated enough libidinous behavior to guarantee that Darcy knew he felt nothing for her. It was also quite useful. Since he proved all of his lust was reserved for those women that were not her, she would have no qualms about letting him stay in her bed.

Despite all of his necessary flirting and kissing, he had never taken any of the ladies to bed. Alright, he had.

But only once and it was so terrible that he wondered if sex had ever been good or if it had all been an illusion. Well, terrible for him at least, his partner perhaps not. He did not want the taste of those women on his tongue, the smell of their hair and sweat on his sheets. Their company was undesirable to him and their motives were equally unappealing. Only one lady existed that he’d ever let into his bed again and only one he intended to keep there. In spite of his erotic jaunts, Darcy Lewis would always be his truest of bedmates.

And it would all be incredibly platonic because he absolutely did not have any feelings for her whatsoever.

And the fact that she didn’t even look at him while he was obnoxiously, deliberately, bare-facedly tonguing ladies in her general vicinity did not disappoint him. His mother was correct in saying that he was a Prince of Asgard and Princes of Asgard do not need to kiss multiple women just to get the attention of one.

Frigga raised an elegant brow when he refused to meet her eyes. He knew perfectly well that it was disgraceful to both his titles’ and the women he took liberties with. But he hardly felt the consequence. Let Asgard think what it wanted of him. What mattered to him was that the report in front of him had been neatly pieced together by his very own advisor.

It proved that Darcy did realize he was kissing women. She knew enough that she had written an entire twelve page essay of the public opinion of him and her difficulty keeping him in good character through the eyes of the people. It was almost satisfying to read. There was so much detail that she must have noticed his displays of affection.

Not that he cared that she saw or had any feelings about it. She wouldn’t anyways. Because she liked women and Loki was a man. It would never work between them.

“Did Darcy mention anything when she gave this to you?” Loki asked, flipping through an article
about his decline in upstanding participation in politics due to distractions of flesh. Several parts were underlined and elaborated on in purple ink. He found it odd that Darcy had brought all this to his mother. Usually she would just explain it to him personally and advise him to rectify his behavior because she couldn’t do it all for him.

But Darcy never even acknowledged his public displays of affection, let alone taking the time to bring them to his attention.

As critical as the articles and pamphlets were, they paled in comparison to Thor’s endeavors. At least Loki had never been, as the Midgardians say, caught with his pants down.

Technically, the only one who had ever seen him doing anything was Darcy. The rest were no more than rumor based conspiracies.

Frigga sighed exasperatedly, closing the report and pulling it away from his greedy fingers. “Loki, all I ask is that you at least attempt to maintain the affectation that you are the couth, respectful prince I raised.”

He smirked up at her, quickly dropping the look after meeting her intense glare of hostility and, worst of all, disappointment. “Mother, I—“

“If you do not do as I ask,” she continued as he tried not to wither under her gaze, “I will take it upon myself to make sure that it is done. Do we have an accord?”

Loki bowed his head. He would agree to anything if it meant that she would cease being disappointed in him. “Yes, Mother.”

“Yes indeed,” she chided, cupping his cheek in her hand, her expression softening. He leaned into her touch, grateful for the comfort. It was miserable enough that he had to kiss ladies he didn’t like just to prove to Darcy that he had no interest in her outside of their friendship without receiving bad publicity for his efforts.

“Loki.”

“Yes, Mother?” he responded somberly while Queen Frigga quirked a humored grin and stepped away.

“When Darcy handed me the report, she asked me to tell you to ‘stop being an idiot’ and also a few uncomplimentary remarks I’d rather not say.”

Loki stood up turning his back to his mother and clasping his hands behind his back, unamused. “That was implied.”

“Quite,” she replied, humored. “You are making her job challenging, Loki. Perhaps you ought to re-evaluate your decisions.” His mother coughed lightly, and Loki turned around to make sure that she did not look ill. “Often times we assume things too quickly and we make decisions we later regret.”

On that note she strode away, leaving Loki to contemplate her words alone. He did not recall ever assuming anything. He did not make assumptions unless they were for scientific purposes.

He groaned loudly, repressing the urge to stomp his foot in irritation and pout like a child. His morning had been decent until he received summons from his mother.

Last night, after returning from a long day of meetings and lessons, Darcy had been busy on
Midgard with a soccer game and Loki with a meeting that he promised her that he would go to. Afterwards he went to the library, intending to stay for only an hour or two until he could return to Midgard and sleep in Darcy’s bed.

But he’d gotten caught up in his projects and before he knew it, the sun was beginning to rise.

On the brighter side of things, he’d finally discovered how to safely take him and Darcy out of Yggdrasil along with the potential location of an infinity stone. This meant not only did they have a way out, they also had a desired location.

This is the news he had been excitedly hurrying to go tell her, Jörmungandr trailing close behind him, when the messenger, Kyrn, delivered his mother’s summons.

Reminded of his revelation, Loki instantly perked up and smiled down at his serpent. “Come Jörmungandr, today we shall go exploring, yes?”

The snake made a sound reminiscent of a bark and Loki grinned widely, letting him wrap around his torso.

Magically, Loki transported them to the passage to Midgard, thinking of the necessary precautions.

Getting out of the Nine Realms Loki believed would be simple enough. They would simply have to gain enough speed to conquer the empty spacial barriers that separated the realms and the Galaxy Beyond. If enough speed was not acquired, or there was no propelling for applied, then traveling parties would be lost in space forever drifting in a sea of nothingness.

Loki could conquer the speed issue without error. He’d tested the necessary velocity required in his longship. That was the easy part.

He quickly discovered why no one else left Yggdrasil. Surviving through space would be difficult. Drastic changes in temperature, lack of breathable air, the unknown in general…there were a great many things to take into consideration. But Loki had perfected a stabilizing spell that would apply to Darcy, Fenrir, Jörmungandr and himself. It had taken effort because he did not know exactly what kind of conditions they would be set in, he could only guess.

The location of the infinity stone was something he’d been working since the spring.

After spending a week attempting to decipher the jumble of languages on Midgard, Loki gave in and flipped the map to analyze the rest of the galaxy.

In less than a day, he had a place he believed a stone could be.

The far corner of the map was isolated from the rest of the rest of the represented galaxy by empty space, much like the void that separated the Nine Realms. Only, this space was different. It seemed to Loki, based on the separation of languages, that this void had been created rather than naturally formed.

The isolated bit of land off in the corner was constructed of Celestian gibberish, phrases and terms Loki could read but could hardly understand. In the center was a blur.

It took him longer than it should have to determine that it was an infinity stone. Even when he became sure of its location, Darcy had been in the midst of mental collapse and he dare not add anything more to her life while she was so stressed.

Besides, before last night, he had no way of exiting Yggdrasil, let alone getting to the infinity
Overcome by enthusiasm, Loki used the portal, sliding out from underneath Darcy’s bed expecting to see her up and ready to get on with her day. Instead she was fast asleep in bed, the covers pulled up over her head and her plaid-pajama clad leg was stretched out across his side of the bed.

Fenrir was sprawled on his back near her feet, thrashing about every few seconds.

Quietly, Loki got into bed, making sure to switch into his regular clothes first, and tugged back the sheet so the side of her face, pink and covered in messy locks of hair, was revealed to him. Her lips were parted as she breathed shallow, steady breaths. “Darcy…” he cooed gently, pushing her hair out of her face. He would braid it before they went on their adventure. “Darcy,” he tried again, scooting closer to kiss her temple companionably. He didn’t have feelings for Darcy, so it didn’t matter if he kissed her face or slept in her bed or thought she was beautiful. He’d always done those things. As much as Loki wasn’t in love with Darcy, he couldn’t stop his need to be affectionate with her.

She groaned, burying her face in her pillow and Loki grinned in triumph, reaching out and pulling her back against his chest. Darcy always slept in late after a soccer game and Loki almost hated to wake her up. Almost. He really liked the annoyed look she wore when she was grumpy and moving around.

He squeezed her middle tightly until she grumbled some kind of complaint about being a weak-boned mortal.

“Darcy, I come bearing good news,” he coaxed as she took one of his hands and brought it up to cover her face.

“Later,” she mumbled, her lips brushing his palm. “I’m sore. And sleeping.”

He smirked, propping himself up a bit so he could blow a trail of cool air over her ear and was rewarded with a swift jab of her elbow to his stomach. “God dammit, Loki,” Darcy swore, swiftly sitting up and rubbing her ear with the palm of her hand.

“Oh, good, you are up,” he said cheerily, watching as she stretched out her limbs.

She sighed, falling back against the pillows. “No. I’m not. I feel like someone beat me with a baseball bat.”

“I take it your game went well?” he asked, subtly using his magic to examine her physical state. Nothing was broken, but she was bruised in several places and her left ankle was sprained. He healed it all and she relaxed considerably.

“We played North and they have a strategy that includes taking down the little guys by trying to bounce the ball off of their bodies. Totally illegal and the referee was so biased I nearly shoved that whistle down his throat. As one of the little guys on offense, I was doomed. But we won and I deserve a little R & R before tonight,” Darcy said, closing her eyes again as he pulled her legs into his lap and rubbed her sore muscles, letting his magic cure her aches slowly.

“I see,” Loki replied, keeping his eyes on her face while she focused on his actions.

She hummed contentedly, jumping a bit when he squeezed the ticklish place above her knee. “So what is this good news?”

Loki shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, nothing. You intend to stay in bed all day so it does not matter,
does it?”

Darcy sat up on her elbows, a pout on her lips and a crease in her brow. “Loki, just tell me,” she pleaded, nudging his thigh with her toe, giving him the opportunity to admire the dark green polish painted on its nail. Originally she wanted purple, but agreed to paint them green under the condition that Loki paint his own a deep shade of violet.

Sighing dramatically, he patted the arch of her foot. “No. I understand. Staying in bed all day and being lazy is important. I should leave.” He moved to the edge of the bed, planting his feet on the floor and acting like he was going to stand up but he stopped when Darcy wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“Me staying in bed all day and being lazy entails that you also stay in bed all day and be lazy with me,” Darcy told him as if it were a matter of fact. “Now quit bullshitting and speak.”

He placed a fist over his heart. “I would never…”

“Loki!” she insisted, pushing him back down on the bed and hovering over him, her hair creating a curtain around their faces. His increase in his heart rate reminded him how much he truly did not have any feelings for Darcy by any means.

He offered her his best toothy grin, “How much time do you think it will take us to go find an infinity stone in the Galaxy Beyond?”

Darcy gasped, looking down at him in disbelief. “What?”

He sat up excitedly, grasping her shoulders. “We can safely leave and I’ve found another stone.”

She was out of bed in an instant, going to her bookshelf and opening the secret compartment where she kept her armor and swords. He averted his eyes, staring at her closet when she began changing into her gear. “Loki, why didn’t you just say so!? Jesus, we’ve got to get going. I’ve got to be back by eight tonight. That only gives us…” she checked her clock, “nine hours! Shit! I slept in till eleven! Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Once she was clothed and her swords were belted on, Loki woke up Jörmungandr and Fenrir and together, the four of them departed for Asgard.

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Darcy was actively ignoring how freaking attractive Loki was when explaining the fundamentals of their inter-galactic travel like the nerd that he was.

It gets worse.

How?

He does stupid shit like wake her up in the morning by snuggling her, and holding her, and being adorable in general. Also being a little shit by massaging her sore muscles. And pushing her hair back behind her ear to kiss her temple? What kind of cruel asshole does that to wake a girl up?

Oh right. The same cruel asshole that she has trouble falling asleep if he isn’t in bed with her.

And that brought them to the present moment, speeding along the horizon while Darcy kept her eyes shut so she didn’t have to see how high up they were.
Loki had just finished explaining the new spell he’d developed that allowed for her to exist in space without dying. She would have no trouble understanding the science of it once she went back and read his notes, but standing there with his hands on her face while he did magic on her person, the listening thing was kind of impossible. It took all of her will not to stare at his mouth and look him in the eyes.

Loki was an attractive prince and she wasn’t ashamed to admit that to herself. Besides, she wasn’t attracted to Loki; she just knew that he was attractive.

“Darcy!” Loki called over the wind as they began speeding up. “Take my hand, Darling.”

Cracking her eyes open, she made her way to his side and tried not to make a big deal of the fact that he’d just called her ‘darling’. She thought back to the numerous women he kissed and instantly replaced that light, fluttery feeling in her belly with dour bitterness. She took his hand, scowling against the strength of the wind. Frank and Fenrir were wrapped tightly around one another as Loki angled the longship upwards.

“We are going to be penetrating the atmosphere soon! It is quite thin; you won’t feel much because we’re going so fast! But once we break the light barrier, I have engineered a protective magical armor to surround the ship!” The longship jostled and Darcy pressed herself closer to his side, wishing she’d actually been paying attention to the science he’d explained earlier instead of watching his lips move. But, hey, priorities.

He let go of her hand to wrap a protective arm around her waist. “Once we are moving and the armor enacts, our speed will increase exponentially over the course of thirty seven milliseconds!”

Darcy peeked up at him through her lashed. “Loki, you’re such a dork! Who the hell counts milliseconds?!”

“They are a practical unit for measuring time!” Loki countered keeping his gaze on the stars that seemed just as far away as ever they were.

“Still a dork,” she muttered under her breath, positive he couldn’t her.

“Darcy?!” Loki shouted as they picked up speed, “What are you doing at eight o’clock this evening?!”

She tightened her arms around him, unsure of what he’d asked. “What?”

“You said earlier that you must be on Midgard by eight. What is it you are doing?” he asked, clearing his throat loudly.

Darcy swallowed hard, her face getting way hotter than it should be.

Oh. That.

“Uh, nothing! I’m just thinking about going to bed early! You know me!”

“Darcy.”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Darcy.”
“You wouldn’t really be interested.”

Loki made a frustrated sound as they accelerated. The Asgardian atmosphere was so much higher than the Midgardian one. Then again, Asgard was a much bigger place. “I assure you, Darcy, I am very interested.”

Darcy shook her head, keeping him on edge. She tried not to smile. Loki had made her suffer through three months of watching him swap spit with literally everyone, so she was exacting her revenge. “You wouldn’t even care!”

“Darcy, come now!” he pleaded, his hand tightening on her hip.

Darcy bit her lip, making him wait. Not that she was bothered by the women kissing Loki, she wasn’t. But she was a teensy weensy bit jealous that Loki was getting it and she wasn’t. Also that the fact he was getting it was being rubbed in her face every damn day. “I will attend all of my meetings next season and I will stop letting Thor use Mjolnir during our training,” he bribed knowingly.

She gave into temptation, crossing her arms and lifting her chin. “I have a date.”

“What?” he gasped in shock, just as they penetrated the atmosphere, broke the light barrier, and were encapsulated in a golden magical field. And for thirty-seven milliseconds, they accelerated into the nothingness of the void separating Yggdrasil and the Galaxy.

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They finally slowed down after five whole seconds of high-speed travel and Loki smiled pleasantly at their success, bouncing on the balls of his feet to find that his gravitational enforcement spell was working out well. And since Darcy, Fenrir, Jörmungandr and himself were all still alive, his protection spells must have worked as well.

Darcy gasped at their new surroundings, her arms loosening from around his body so she could better see the galaxy that was not her own. He watched her amazement, her wonder, as she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose to better see the stars. Her lips were parted in amazement and Loki found the new sky anticlimactic compared to her.

“Oh my god, Loki,” she laughed, nearly throwing herself into his arms, wrapping her arms around his neck and spinning them around. “You’re amazing.”

“I know,” he sighed, “It is a burden I must bear.”

“And you ruined it,” she sighed, threading her fingers into his hair, her nails scraping lightly against his scalp.

Loki was prepared to sink into her embrace and forget about their expedition entirely in favor of drifting around in space with Darcy in his arms. Then he remembered that repulsive little detail she’d let slip before they were launched into the Galaxy. He cleared his throat, backing away a bit. “So, you have a date?”

Darcy opened her mouth to respond, but her words were cut short by a bark-like-hiss and a hiss-like-bark. Loki swiftly pushed the four of them out of the ship before a giant, speeding spacecraft crashed right through his longship as if it were nothing.

The crash slowed the vehicle down and Loki thought fast. Their way back to Yggdrasil was now a lost cause. Rebuilding his longship from its current obliterated state would not do. And he couldn’t
do so hovering in space. Their best chance of returning or at least finding the infinity stone they’d come for resided in the damned ship that almost killed them.

“Hold on,” he directed Darcy, clutching her and his pets close before magically transporting them aboard.

In a flash of green light they materialized in what looked like the passenger area of the ship and it took Loki a moment to realize that the ship was not only a vehicle, but also a living space. It was a mess, but it had the potential to be very nice. There was a table and something that looked similar to a Midgardian refrigerator and a staircase that appeared to move to a lower level.

Music, sounding oddly Midgardian, played lowly in the background and Loki vaguely recognized the lyrics. Darcy had a stereo in her room and she played CDs often. Lately she’d been asking her parents for an ‘iPod’.

‘…Press your space face close to mine, love
Freak out in a moonage daydream, oh yeah!’

Loki kept his arms wrapped around Darcy’s waist, holding her body to his as he searched let his magic search for any immediate signs of danger.

There was one being in the cockpit, but other than that, there were no immediate signs of danger.

“I hate to break up this lovely high school dance thing happening here, but who the hell are you, and speak fast before I—“

Loki and Darcy moved fast, whipping out their weapons and taking deadly aim at the young man threatening them with some odd sort of gun. Quick as they were with their response, Jörmungandr and Fenrir were quicker, pouncing on their opponent and tackling him to the ground, knocking the weapons from his hands.

Loki waved an errant hand to cast cuffs on the man, binding his wrists in front of him.

“Aww,” Darcy cooed. “Frank, Fenrir, you guys are so sweet,” she congratulated them, bending over to rub their heads and distract them from eating the unsuspecting pilot. The two rarely had any true malice unless Loki and Darcy were in danger. This being the case, it was always a good idea to reassure them of the state of their safety lest they fear the situation be worse than it was. It warmed Loki’s heart at how protective the two little friends were.

He nodded to them in thanks and they both wagged their tails happily, trotting/slithering away from the fallen man who was swearing loudly.

“Hey dude, not cool!” he complained, struggling against his confines. Loki noted that he was carrying several weapons and he took the liberty of magically removing them, smiling smugly when they all clattered across the table in the nearby vicinity. Other than the weapons, he wore a burgundy colored coat and simple pants. He got to his feet easily enough and Loki noted that the man was older than him, taller, and more muscular. But he was not, however, bigger than Thor.

Darcy crossed her arms, saucily throwing her hip to the side. “Um, excuse me? You’re the ass that just rammed through our ship while we were still in it!”

“Well, I’m sorry if you parked your fucking ship in the middle of the space-way, but that’s not my problem!” he countered as Loki had picked up one of the man’s guns and was taking it apart. It seemed no more than a Midgardian ‘taser’ only the volts were transferred as projectiles and were a
great deal stronger.

The cuffed man kept talking running his mouth. “And tell your boyfriend to put down my gun. I don’t want to get shocked while I beat his ass and kick you two out of my ship.”

Loki smirked at him being referenced as Darcy’s boyfriend. Obviously, this odd space fellow believed that they looked a good couple. Not that Loki cared. He reminded himself how much he didn’t care as he reassembled the weapon and set it aside.

“He’s not my boyfriend. But good luck with the whole beating his ass thing,” Darcy said, walking to the cockpit and sitting down in one of the chairs. “I hope you don’t mind, but we’re borrowing your ship.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so!” the man taunted, turning to Loki and directing a well aimed kick at his side and Loki deflected the offense, dropping the newly reconfigured weapon he’d been toying with. His defense was sudden and perhaps too strong, for upon his movements he heard the telltale snap of a bone and the man’s yelp of pain as he fell back against the bench near the cassette player and speakers.

“Ow! Shit! Bro, you just broke my fucking leg!”

Darcy made an irritated sound as the ship lurched forwards a bit. “Loki, did you seriously just break his leg?”

“It was an accident,” Loki said innocently, feeling some sympathy for the strange man, “Darcy, I think he is a mortal. Or at least part mortal. I did not expect him to break so easily.” He frowned at the man’s leg, using his magic to heal it.

“Who the fuck are you and what the fuck was that?” the man asked as the ship lurched again.

“And, you, tiny person trying to steal my ship? You see that pedal on the floor, how about holding that down and then propelling the fucking vehicle.”

Darcy turned in her chair, glaring angrily as she purposefully made the ship jerk back and forth a few more times.

Loki felt an odd sense of pride wash through him at this as he turned back to the irritating space-man. “I am Loki, Prince of Asgard, and that was me healing your leg. Sit down, or next time it will be your skull in need of repair.”

The man didn’t sit down, “Okay, ‘Prince’ Loki. I haven’t heard of you, but maybe you’ve heard of me?”

Loki took out his dagger, twirling it around his fingers dexterously as Darcy maneuvered the ship. “Doubtful.”

“They call me Star-Lord.”

Darcy snorted, “Dude, that’s so lame. You have a code name?”

‘Star-Lord’ looked offended. “It’s an outlaw name! And it is not lame! I don’t see you being called anything cool, ‘Darcy’.”

Loki rolled his eyes, stowing his dagger, moving to the table to find some way to identify the man. He came across a card. “His name is Peter Quill.”
Darcy snapped her fingers like she was trying to recall something. “I’ve heard that name before. I’ve read it somewhere. Loki, where have I read that name before?”

Loki agreed that his name was familiar. “I do not—“

“SHIELD files!” she exclaimed, standing up from her place at the head of the ship to examine the man, Peter Quill. “You disappeared off the face of the Earth in Colorado right after your mom died.”

Surprise lit Quill’s face. “Wait, Terra…I mean, Earth, remembers me?”

Darcy snorted, poking his face. “Hardly, you were in a SHIELD file locked away in the miscellaneous section of a hard drive.”

“Darcy, do not touch it. Apparently the mortal is a criminal,” Loki said, exploring the ship’s technology. More advanced than Midgardian work, less than Asgard’s simplest machines.

Peter Quill huffed. “Is he always that mean?”

Darcy ignored him. “Watch it, Lokes. I’m a mortal, remember.”

Loki, cursed himself, tearing his attentions away from the technology to cup Darcy’s cheek in his palm. “I know you are. I love your mortality almost as much as I love you,” he assured, with a sickening amount of sentiment. He was sincere, but with enough cloying ‘mush’, as Darcy would call it, that it hardly carried the same weight.

Peter Quill made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. “Dude, gross. Have at least some mystery, dear god. Not in my ship, please.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, shoving him away. “You’re such a little shit, Loki. Get the map and let’s find this thing. We’ve only got, like, eight hours left.”

“What are we finding?” Peter Quill asked, finally sitting down and putting his feet up. “I think I deserve to know since this is my ship and all.”

Loki took the map from his pocket and laying it out beside the ship’s console so Darcy could read it. “Right, because you have a date.”

“Yeah, I do,” Darcy said, rifling through Peter Quill’s messy collection of papers till she found something that looked like a map and laid it down near their own. “What about it?”

Loki shrugged, comparing the two charts. “Nothing. It just seems odd that you didn’t mention it sooner.”

Darcy instantly stood up straighter, turning to him with measured self-control. Her blue eyes flashed with anger yet to be released. “You want to repeat that, Your Highness?”

He made a face. She knew he hated it when she called him that. He tried to decipher why she was so angry. What had he said? He hadn’t said anything, had he? “What? I simply thought that you might tell me if you had interest in someone.”

“Oh my fucking god!” she cried out, slamming her hand down on the map in disbelief. “I cannot even believe that you just said that.”

Confused, Loki pointed to the location on Peter Quill’s map that matched their own. The
destination didn’t seem to exist. Their map depicted a planet of sorts and Loki scowled at it. “Head for this general area. Can you navigate?”

“Obviously,” Darcy said, sitting down furiously, examining the many different gauges on the console.

He couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not. “Darcy, what did I say?”

The ship lurched forwards at shocking speeds as she glared up at him. “It’s not what you said, ‘Darling’, it’s what you didn’t say!”

Loki just shook his head at her and she nearly growled.

There were a few crashes in the kitchen area and Loki saw Jörmungandr and Fenrir raiding the fridge out of the corner of his eye. “What didn’t I say?”

She made a sharp turn, dodging a bit of drifting stone. “Oh, I don’t know, how about why you’re suddenly acting like Casanova, Johnny Bravo, and Genghis Khan all in one!”

Peter Quill let out a low whistle. “Nice, man!”

Loki was victorious. Darcy had noticed that he was attracting attention from women and she was angry about it. Excellent. Not that he wanted Darcy to be angry with him, but her rage was indication that she felt some of the possessiveness towards him that he, potentially, felt for her. “So?” he asked, crossing his arms casually while she fumed, “Why would you even care?”

Darcy gripped the steering device so tightly Loki feared she might break it. He was about to add that he had no children, therefore he was not Genghis Khan, but he was cut off by the sound of slow song lyrics.

‘I must have been through about a million girls
I'd love 'em then I'd leave 'em alone’

Loki turned to glare at Peter Quill who was nodding at him with helpful intent, giving him the Midgardian ‘okay’ hand signal.

‘But then I fooled around and fell in love
I fooled around and fell in love, yes I did’

Darcy threw her hands in the air. “Why do I care?” she laughed humorlessly, “How about because I have to keep up the pretense that you even care what Asgard thinks about you? Or maybe that I came back from Culver and suddenly you, Mr. Dedications-To-Magic, seem to just charm every girl right out of her fucking pants? And then when we’re alone, you act like everything’s normal and you’re not sucking face with literally everyone on Asgard!”

Loki found the autopilot switch and turned it on before Darcy killed them. “Darcy, what do you—“

“Don’t finish that question,” she snapped, taking Peter Quill’s map and beginning to chart coordinates based on star location. “We still sleep together every freaking night, unless you forget that sleep exists, and you snuggle harder than a kitten!”

“We’ve always slept together,” Loki pointed out, more than a little hurt that she was opposed to the snuggling.


“You’re missing the point!”

‘When you hold me

In your arms so tight

You let me know

Everything’s alright

I’m hooked on a feeling!’

Loki grit his teeth, resentfully looking to Peter Quill who was signaling him a subtle thumbs up.

“No, you are missing the point!” Loki retorted, neglecting to acknowledge their captive. Perhaps he’d misinterpreted Darcy’s fury. Did she not like snuggling? He loved it. Did she want him to stop? How awful would that be? “Everything is normal! We have shared a bed for how many years now? And what, pray tell, is wrong with the snuggles?”

Darcy seethed, standing up to better glower at him. “Nothing. There is nothing wrong with the snuggles,” she said through her teeth.

‘…All the good love

when we’re all alone

keep it up girl

yeah you turn me on’

Loki’s gaze fixated briefly on Peter Quill, his face getting uncomfortably warm. This was not helping. Darcy did not turn him on; although, she did look rather alluring when she was infuriated with him.

“So you are upset because I did not tell you about the women?” he clarified, conjuring a pen and fixing a small error she’d made in her calculations.

“To some extent, yeah!” Darcy said, playing around with the devices on the console and setting their newly determined coordinates.

Loki held up his hands, “You know who all of them are! You wrote a report on it and gave it to my mother!”

Peter Quill sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Okay, ew? Like, your mom knows about your sex life? Dude, not cool.”

“Shut the fuck up, Quill,” Darcy commanded. “Of course I know who they are! I want to know why you just suddenly decided to fuck Lady Volla so hard that she walked bowlegged for a week and why every lady in the freaking palace is whispering about your tongue!”

Loki cringed in memory. Lady Volla. She had been the deliverer of bad sex.

“Dude, you’re just good, aren’t you? I feel like I can relate,” Peter Quill said most uselessly and Loki sighed in anguish as their captive stood up, with his wrists still tight in their cuffs, and walked towards them, companionably bumping Loki’s shoulder. “And, look, Darcy, to be fair, if I could fuck as many bitches as he seems to be getting, I would totally do it.”
Loki pushed Peter Quill away, contemplating binding his tongue as well. “Darcy, it was only one lady of the court! I did not tell you because I did not think you had any interests in who I chose to fuck!”

“Oh I don’t,” Darcy assured, putting her hands on her hips.

“You don’t?” Loki said disbelievingly. She was lying. She had to be lying. Clearly she cared. Not that he would care if their positions were switched. He wouldn’t. But he knew that she didn’t like his affiliations with women that were not her. “For some reason I doubt you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.”

She snorted. “Well then why do you care about the fact that I’ve got a date?”

“I don’t,” Loki said smoothly. He didn’t truly care that Darcy had dates. There was no point in caring. Even if he did wish to court her, which he did not, she would not wish to be with him because she liked women.

‘I’m not in love
so don’t forget it
It’s just a silly phase I’m going through’

Darcy and Loki stared at Peter Quill who was whistling idly, clearly ignoring their lethal expressions.

“I do not give a damn who you let in your bed, Darcy,” Loki said quietly, stepping closer to her so she had to angle her head up to look him full in the face. “So long as I am not there when you’re disappointed with your results.”

“Ooo,” Peter Quill said under his breath, “Sick burn.”

Darcy shoved him away. “Good. Because my ass has no shortage of admirers and, hell, maybe I’ll finally take Fandrall up on his offer!”

Loki swallowed his bile. “Darcy, do not say that. I think my stomach just dissolved itself.”

What an incredibly crude thing to say. Fandrall. Disgusting. Out of all the men she could have used as an example, why Fandrall? She did not even like men.

Darcy made a face as well. “Yeah, okay, you got me there. I wouldn’t go that far. But you know that date I have tonight that you don’t care about?”

“Oh yeah.”

She pushed her glasses up sassily. “It’s going to be great and I’m wearing that little black dress that makes my tits look fucking fantastic!”

Loki felt like he was going to explode into a billion tiny pieces. He knew exactly which dress she was talking about. “Firstly Darcy, your breasts always look fucking fantastic! Secondly, it is December, you will freeze in that outfit!”

“My date can keep me warm!”
'Can’t stay at home can’t stay in school
Old folks say, ya poor little fool
Down the street I’m the girl next door
I’m the fox worth waiting for!
Hello Daddy, hello Mom
I’m your ch-ch-ch-cherry bomb!
Hello world, I’m your wild girl
I’m your ch-ch-ch-cherry bomb!’

Loki was too absorbed in fighting with Darcy to pay Peter Quill any of his attention. “What is her name?”

“What?” Darcy sneered, crossing her arms.

“Your date,” Loki demanded in a low growl. “What is her name?”

Darcy raised a brow. “His name is Johnny. Johnny Storm.”

What.

Loki just stared at her, unblinking, unmoving, unbelieving.

Then he understood his error.

Darcy had a date with an Idiot Boy.

Darcy liked men as well as women.

He was the most foolhardy dolt ever to live.

“Oh baby, give me one more chance
(to show you that I love you)
Won’t you please let me back in your heart’

He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her against him and pushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. He cradled the back of her head, gently tugging down on her thick brown tendrils so she could spit her rage directly at his face. Gods she was beautiful. Her fingers twisted in his own black locks almost painfully as they glared heatedly at each other. Loki was aware of how
close her mouth was to his and how the feel of her breath against his lips made his skin tingle, awaiting sensation.

‘Baby, please, go all the way
It feels so right (feels so right)
Being with you here tonight
Please, go all the way
Just hold me close (hold me close)
Don't ever let me go’

Peter Quill cleared his throat loudly. “Hey, guys, this is great, I’m really happy for you. I can tell this has been a very rough break up. But, please, I ask this as a man with a love for his own ship, please do not fuck in the pilot’s chair. That’s my special place. Passenger seat, sure. You can even do it on the table, just not the chair. I’ll go downstairs. You guys are way too tense and the coordinates you put in lead to some place four hours away that doesn’t even exist.” Peter Quill held up his cuffed hands innocently. “I’m just sayin’, you need to resolve this tension. It’s unhealthy,”

“Do tell me, Darling, for I am curious,” Loki snarled, completely disregarding Peter Quill, “What else does he have besides blonde hair that could possibly gain your favor?”

Darcy’s brows came together and her blue eyes flashed in a way that made his knees weak. He shivered with anticipation, waiting for her gaze to set him aflame.

But the heat never came. Instead, she loosened her tight grip on his hair, a frown settling itself in the lines of her face. “He likes me. He wants to go on a date with me and maybe he wants to be in a relationship with me. He’s funny and hot and he asked me out with a cup of coffee. And. I. Like. Him.”

Her words sunk in slowly, like a stone through cooling tar, and soon they stuck in his mind as a solid impression of his mistake. There was no clear definition of how he felt, only that everything inside him hurt so much he felt sick.

The Idiot Boy, Johnny Storm, had been smarter than him.

“Aw, I thought you guys were going to kiss and make up or something,” Peter Quill complained.

“We’re not together, Star-Lord,” Darcy told him, quickly looking away from Loki. “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Up those stairs,” he said quietly, nodding his head in the right direction.

She brushed past him, making her way up the odd metal stairs. It wasn’t until heard the opening and closing of door that Loki remembered to breathe. But what use was breathing now that he realized his mistake?

Darcy made it vaguely clear that had he shown interest in her, had he simply told her that he wanted her she might have reciprocated.

And, yes, Loki did have feelings for her. He wasn’t entirely sure what they were or how they got
there or even why, but they existed. When Darcy first came back from Culver, he wanted to be sure of himself, of what he wanted, before asking anything of her. And then she’d told him of Idiot Girl and he’d assumed the worst.

And even after being proved wrong, there was no hope for him.

Confused, aching, and utterly ashamed, Loki stood by the console with his arms feeling particularly empty and his lips cold.

‘O-o-oh child things are gonna get easier
O-o-oh child thing will be brighter…’

Peter Quill offered him a sympathetic look. “What hurts more right now: your heart or your dick?”

“Yes,” Loki answered bitterly, falling into the pilot’s chair and preparing to brood for the next century.

***

Darcy stood in the bathroom for a good thirty minutes. She would have stayed longer, but there was a poster of a naked woman posing by a space-ship hanging on the wall and Darcy couldn’t properly think things through with those seductive eyes staring at her.

Those stolen moments weren’t nearly enough time to think her way through everything she wanted to. But the basis of her thought process boiled down to:

Jesus Christ, Loki Odinson, what the Hel.

She took deep breaths, splashing cold water on her skin.

If she’d known Loki was going to react that way to her dating a guy, maybe she should’ve accepted Johnny Storm’s date invitation sooner.

Her freshman year of high school, Darcy had tutored his sister, Susan, who was senior class president at the time. Darcy found out quickly that Sue was really sweet and really smart.

Johnny, while quite an intelligent individual, was not sweet. Not at all. He was, however, boiling hot and only one grade ahead of Darcy. They had Advanced Physics together and Darcy spent most of the class using him as her personal distraction. Tall, broad shoulders, narrow waist, thick arms, messy blonde hair, he wasn’t Darcy’s first choice, but they flirted all the time and she was well aware that he enjoyed watching her walk away almost as much as he liked talking with her.

Her ass, once again, was totally on point.

Upon Darcy’s first week of meeting Johnny Storm, he asked her out twice. The first time had been a joking, informal suggestion that they skip class and get frisky somewhere they shouldn’t because she was complaining about how the janitors’ closets weren’t being put to good use. Darcy denied him with a liberal amount of snark.

The second time he asked her out was more formal. He invited her to ditch fifth period for him to take them on his motorcycle to go get lunch. It was a tempting offer, especially when his face was so damn attractive. But she declined his offer, thinking of how difficult it would be to date when she had so much to do already. Even as she denied him, she felt extremely dissatisfied. She deserved to go on dates and her work wasn’t imperative. She could make the time to be in a
relationship or at least have someone with whom she could swap spit. Loki had a plethora of those partners.

In some horrifying ways, Johnny reminded Darcy of Loki. Neither of them obeyed the rules. What were rules? They didn’t know. They did whatever the hell they wanted and only accepted the consequences if it benefitted them. Not that they ever had to face the consequence of anything; they would have to get caught for that to happen. If Loki was the Asgardian version of a bad-boy, Johnny Storm was the epitome of the mortal model.

Darcy tended to partner up with him in labs because they could both idly do the work while talking. And by ‘talking’ Darcy totally meant ‘flirting’. They flirted non-stop.

Flirting wasn’t new to Darcy. She was a member of the Asgardian council and was working her way up to be in Odin’s inner circle of councilmen. The ‘High Council’, as he called it, was her desired place. But she would have to wait. In her current position, one of the best ways of being personable with people was to dance and laugh.

Johnny wasn’t an idiot and he’d already been accepted to Columbia University to study Physical Science. It took her forever to coax the truth out of him, but eventually he told her that he wanted to be an astronaut.

That’s when Darcy decided she would ask him out sometime. Johnny Storm confessing under his breath that he wanted to be an astronaut like a child with big eyes and bigger dreams was just too cute. So, last night, when Johnny Storm showed up after her soccer game with a cup of iced coffee and an offer to hang out the next evening. He told her that it didn’t have to be a date, but he did want to spend time with her. Darcy knew Johnny was a sweet talker, but she figured ‘what the hell?’ What was she waiting for? So, she asked him if he would reconsider going out with her, to which he said: “I’d be an idiot if I didn’t want to go out with you, babe.”

Boo Yah.

Darcy had winked at him and put an extra sway in her hips as she walked away just because she liked to look over her shoulder and see that mesmerized look on his face. Under normal circumstances, she would be pissed that someone was checking out her ass in such detail. But she kind of liked how Johnny was forward in his attraction to her and, to be fair, she spent her fair share of time watching his ass as well. He was hot, confident, hot, funny, hot, and he bought her coffee. What’s not to like?

She was actually really excited for their date even if her father was extremely disappointed that she wasn’t lesbian. She’d let it slip to her parents that she had a relationship with a girl over the summer and Mr. Lewis was so relieved that he spent the next week happily reminding her of the benefits of being homosexual. His reasons mainly included no teen pregnancy.

The poor man almost cried when she told him she was a date with a guy. He had personally scheduled her appointment with her Ob/Gyn clinic. It was beyond embarrassing, but at least he cared.

Her mother had just been happy that Darcy was going out on a date. Darcy tried to explain Johnny the best she could to her mother, but the way she explained him made the school’s Hot-Bad-Boy sound like a cute nerdy bloke with a nice ass.

She wondered what they would think of Loki. He would probably do that thing with his eyebrows and make their knees weak because his face was just so annoying. And his eyes. Those were annoying too. And he smelled annoying. And his wiry physique…so very, very annoying.
And the most annoying thing of all is when he does crazy shit like everything that just happened out there.

He just got so defensive over her going on a date with a guy. It was like she was his younger sister or something.

Groaning, she let her head fall against the posters, her forehead thumping against the pink woman’s breasts. Great. That was it, wasn’t it? Loki was bringing out the ol’ overprotective older brother routine.

Perfect.

Great.

Fine.

Whatever.

What did she expect? That he might care? That he might be a bit angry? A bit jealous? Why would he be? He had all of those other women. He didn’t need her too. Not that she even wanted him. She wasn’t going to beat off ladies of the court with a stick. Loki could make his own decisions, just as she could make hers.

She was Darcy Fucking Lewis. She argued with kings, slept (chastely) with princes and drank tea with a Queen. She was outside of fucking Yggdrasil in some weirdo’s space ship for Christ sakes. She could have a fucking boyfriend if she wanted one.

And if Loki had a problem with it, he could kiss her ever loving ass, because she only had one older brother and he was at university in California.

With one last splash of cold water on her face, she made to leave the bathroom. But the moment her hand went to open the funky-space-door, she was thrown suddenly to the side.

She swore, working to get to her feet, holding her upper arm which was going to have a wicked bruise from hitting the counter.

Injury was far from her mind as she stumbled through the bathroom door. The entire ship was quaking violently, gadgets fell from high shelves, the walls vibrated, and Peter Quill’s voice could be faintly heard over the chaos.

The stairs were close and Darcy made it down them without falling. As soon as she made it to the bottom, the ship jerked forwards and Darcy staggered back, her glasses flying from her face. The telltale crack was disappointing, but it wasn’t enough to distract her from her main worry.

“Loki!?” she shouted, now squinting at the blurry cockpit of Peter Quill’s ship. She was used to looking at things without her glasses because she didn’t wear them on Asgard, but usually Asgard wasn’t about to be destroyed in a terrible space accident.

“Darcy!” Loki called back and she saw him by the pilot’s chair. She tripped over her feet, fighting the throes of mayhem overtaking the ship in order to reach him.

Peter Quill’s shouting became legible as she approached, barely dodging a boot that flew past her head. “…You flew us into a fucking storm! You are supposed to avoid these things! I told you, ‘Dude, don’t fly into that fucking cloud of dangerous looking shit.’ And what do you do? You fly into the worst fucking part of the dangerous looking shit!”
Darcy gasped as she stared out the window panel into the terrifying abyss they’d flown into. It was like they’d been submerged in a black cloud where a few spots of color blurred into existence, flashing in obvious threat. “Loki, what the hell?!”

Her friend had both hands on the console, frantically typing things, fingers flying as he watched the world outside. His green eyes were wide in wonder and that dangerous bit of curiosity. It reminded her how bored he was with idly doing research on Asgard. This is what Loki liked: almost dying while discovering new shit that everyone could have gone their entire lives without knowing. It was on her very long list of annoying things that she platonically loved about him.

That awed look on his face was giving her very conflicted feelings. “Darcy, do you not see it?”

She squinted into the storm, her eyes tracing over the streaks of green light in the distance that glittered like stars. Even from where they flew she could feel the terrific power they were emanating. “Um, I see us dying in the near future! Loki, get us out of here!”

Dissatisfaction crossed over his angular features. “You do not see it.”

“I see death! Is that not enough? Did you want a detailed description of us looking like crispy critters in the middle of the fucking galaxy?!”

He shook his head, his black hair falling from behind his ears, the sharp trimmed ends brushing his chin as he studied the sky. “We will not die. There is more.”

“More?” Peter Quill said, incredulously. “You want more?!”

Darcy grabbed one of Loki’s wrists, feeling how strong his magic was pushing into the ship, keeping them stabilized. If he was to break magical focus for even a moment, Peter Quill’s ship would not survive the storm. His face was contorted in frightening determination and Darcy knew he would not take such a dangerous risk with her present unless he had a damned good reason.

Inhaling deeply, Darcy brought her attentions back to the hectic space before them, willing herself to see what he saw. His magic buzzed under her fingers and she gazed warily at the cloud.

With every bit of will in her body, she pulled at her sense of magic, at her weak ability to feel only a fraction of what Loki knew. She pulled at it so hard her insides felt like they were being stretched through a taffy puller, the soft striations of her magical muscles stretching so hard they would have bled had her pain been physical. But it was at the height of her agony that she saw it.

Light. Vicious, powerful, blinding light. Colors replaced spots of black, but she had not the words to identify them. All of it was so familiar, like she’d been seeing them all forever. It was only when she peered deeper into the void and witnessed a magnificent flare of a rainbow flickering in its depths did she realize that Loki was flying them straight into a colossal portal.

Loki had only theorized about passages of such a size. Anything was doable in theory, but this…it verged on impossibility.

One second of magical sight was one second to many and she retracted her hand from Loki’s wrist, releasing her tight hold on Loki’s wrist to slump to the ground. “Oh shit,” she slurred, light headed. If her vision had been blurry before, she was now nearing blind. Consciousness was quickly slipping from between her fingers as she fought to hold on.

Far away from her mind a bone clacking explosion split the ship and Peter Quill’s varied explicative language nearly drowned out the sound.
“Darcy!”

Loki’s voice sounded through the growing space between them.

A slick, scaly body wrapped around her middle as she drifted away, as if underwater. Loki called to her again, but she was already far too gone to answer him.

***

Sigyn did not want to like Thor.

In her mind, there wasn’t much that she should like about him. He was brash, violent, rude and an unpleasant child. He was the epitome of the type of man she was raised to be subject to and his affections for Sif were enough to drive Sigyn to jealousy.

It was not that Sigyn was jealous of Thor. How could she be? There was nothing about him she found worthy of her envy, nothing physical or mental he had that she desired.

But she was jealous of him. She admitted it to herself daily how it was him, the blonde-haired son of an Ass, who had the power to give her Lady everything she ever wanted.

Who was it that gave Sif her armor and her sword? Companionship and challenges, adventures and laughter…all were funded by Thor’s friendship.

Sigyn often thought about what her life would be like if she were to marry Sif. What a nightmare that would be. No doubt her parents would disown her from the family for dedicating herself to a person with whom she could not make a person of their own blood. She would be left to poverty with nothing but the useless training of a lady and a head full of fictional tales she enjoyed reading.

Sif worked diligently for what she wanted for her life and it pained Sigyn to her very core that Sif could be better off without her, for she could offer nothing but herself and the love she had for the dark haired lady.

While Sigyn had previously been the most desired lady in the capital, her engagement of Thor had worked like magic to divert any suitors. They fled, their masculine tails between their legs, preening for another woman who might accept their hand. Now, when she sat at feasts next to Thor, as they were both obligated to tolerate one another’s company in public, Sif was laughing with her comrades, oblivious to their looks of pure adoration and attraction.

Did she not see that her every aspect, every movement and smile bore power? Could she not sense the wretched stench of their want for her? Sigyn found herself even more bitter of the less wealthy women because they had no obligation to bloodline or titles; they could be as they are and wed Sif without controversy.

She was mocked in loving Sif by her betrothal to Thor.

He was of age now and they were destined to be married soon.

Now, while Sigyn wanted to hate Thor for having the power to give Sif all that she could ever want, she did not. She knew for certain that the golden prince had no interest in either of the ladies romantically. As far as Sigyn knew, Thor never fancied any woman. He’d never willingly courted or romanced. Perhaps the right person had not come along yet. Sigyn reckoned that it would take a resilient woman to be partnered with his majesty, the prince of Asgard.

Then again, Sigyn was the woman partnered to him, was she not?
That disgusting arrangement had yet to be dealt with.

Thor knew now that Sif was her lady and that she was Sif’s. The night he interrupted them in Sif’s bed (a new destination for their passionate activities as they’d been taking many a risk that summer) he laughed so hard his face turned red. He congratulated them and teased Sif about how he knew there was a reason behind her happiness.

Of course, no matter how well Thor believed they went together, they could not make their relationship known to the public.

If Asgard was to know that Sif was in love with a woman and that she did not court men, then all rights she had to earning back her title and her family were gone. Sigyn wouldn’t ask Sif to do that, especially since she worked so diligently, so thoroughly to get her title back and become the finest warrior Asgard has ever seen.

She already was in Sigyn’s opinion, but of course the realm wanted proof. They would get it soon enough, for the war with Vanahheim was undoubtedly approaching.

Darcy had relaxed a great deal over the summer and for this Sigyn was glad; the little lady had been sick with stress. It was pleasing that her friend was well once again, though she did seem quite wound up as of late. Although, Sigyn felt the cause of her tense behaviors was rooted in Prince Loki’s rumored romanticisms. No one but Darcy ever claimed to have seen Loki in any of the zealous, lust-filled embraces the ladies gossiped about.

Sigyn would have believed that Darcy was simply being paranoid and in search of ways to hide her desires for Loki. However, she and Loki still conversed frequently and he confided in her, making the claim that Darcy liked only women.

Hardly surprised, she asked him why he should care to which he responded, “I do not. T’was only a shock.”

Sigyn, to put it as Darcy would, called ‘shenanigans’. The both of them were so very intelligent yet so stupidly oblivious. She figured she ought to let them suffer in their own idiocy. If they cannot be bold enough to state their affections, or better yet, display them as Sigyn had, then they deserve to suffer, for they are unprepared for the love of the other.

Then again, Sigyn supposed there must be other reasons. Loki was a prince and Darcy had not a well known family, in accordance to social standards, their courtship would be improper.

As for Sigyn, her parents would disown her the moment she told them that she had even the slightest of doubts about marrying Thor. Queen of Asgard was the highest position she could marry into and her parents, High Lord and Lady of Jolena, would not dare to let their daughter, Lady Sigyn, marry any but the best.

And yet, with the expectation of becoming Allmother approaching, Sigyn had not seen her family in over a century. Not that it mattered to them; she carried their name and their title, the greatest signs of their love she would ever receive.

It occurred to Sigyn often, that besides Sif’s love, her title was all she could truly call hers. And when she weighed their worth in mind, even one small taste of her lady’s lips was priceless compared to her name, for it was naught but a bill of sale from the purchase of the crowned prince’s hand.

His hand, which she was expected to take nearly every afternoon for a walk through the gardens or
a dance in the feasting hall, was currently holding hers in the crook of his arm.

Even though Sigyn did not want to like Thor, she had come to accept the fact that he was not a terrible person. Arrogant and childish though he was, he cared enough about Sif and Loki that she did not truly hate him.

But more importantly, they shared one common sentiment that knit them together through their forced acquainting; neither of them wanted to marry the other.

Their time together was spent scheming, hours and hours of scheming how to get out of their arranged marriage. Thor was of course doing it for the sake of his bachelor days, but both of them stood for Sif’s happiness. It was an implicit truth between them that they did not wish to see her strong features fall when her closest friend and lady love were forced to marry.

Yet, despite the length of time they spent plotting the ruin of their wedding, they came no closer to finding a solution.

Thor sighed, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “I could ask Loki to set the floor aflame, only as an illusion. I’m sure he would find it entertaining.”

Sigyn quirked a grin. “Yes. Or we could send the cake to Volstagg for breakfast and the ceremony would be postponed.”

“Yes,” he said tiredly as they had been listing off ridiculous scenarios most of the afternoon. “We could drink the ale before the ceremony rather than after and watch Darcy and Loki argue again.”

“Ahh,” Sigyn chuckled, remembering a few weeks ago when they pushed one another into a heated discussion about the proper amount of alcohol an Infinite Serpent could consume without becoming intoxicated. It was entertaining, mainly because neither of them could hold their drink well at all. “That could be amusing, though I do recall Darcy swearing herself to sobriety the following morn.”

Thor chortled, shaking his head fondly. “Very well, no ale. I could be unfaithful to you.”

Sigyn gave him a sideway glance and they both laughed so hard it hurt, for even Sigyn knew that the only thing of Thor’s that received any semblance of fidelity was Mjolnir. How ridiculous it was to conspire over ill thoughts only to come forth with fictitious circumstances that they had no intentions of seeing through? Her throat tightened and she tugged on Thor’s arm for him to stop.

He did so and she watched as the humor vanished from his face when he witnessed the severity of her expression. “What have I done?”

She very nearly rolled her eyes. “I am not angry with you…well, not anymore than I was already.”

“Then why—“

“What is the point, Thor?” Sigyn said quietly, lowering her voice for Thor’s sake. She hardly cared what anyone truly thought of her anymore. Let them hear Lady Sigyn shout at her ‘beloved’ prince. “We could discuss means to corrupt the ceremonies, yet the true fault lies within the very basis of our matrimony. We cannot be. This…planning for events that might never take place…is useless.”

She sighed heavily, willing herself not to cry in frustration. Thor’s large hand patted hers. “I know. Still it helps, does it not? To make light of it?”
Determinedly, she lifted her chin, staring her betrothed in his deep blue eyes. There she saw everything that she would ever need to know about the future of their marriage. They would wed, perhaps they would sleep in the same bed, but they would not consummate the marriage. He would be unfaithful to her as she would be to him. Sif would be heartbroken and Sigyn would boil with rage every moment of everyday while she kept her love a secret.

She could not let that happen. Her pride would not stand for lying to the Nine Realms and the gods about who had her heart. “I will not marry you, Thor. We must find a way around this.”

His blonde brows came together, mirroring Sigyn’s irritation. “I do not think either of us have a choice.”

Disbelief cloaked her skin, setting a steady drip of anger to pool in the pit of her stomach. “How do you mean?” she growled lowly.

Thor pulled away from her, crossing his thick, masculine arms, his shoulder brushing the leaves of an enormous lilac bush. “Come now, Sigyn. It is too late. There is nothing to do. The Allfather believes that the only possible way to tame my merriment is marriage and your parents would sooner let the dogs have you than to deny you the throne. And for what? The hand of a nameless military woman?”

Her fists clenched and shook at her sides. Rage became her and she found herself powerless, a small bead of energy with no purpose or destination, no outlet or system to be of value to. She couldn’t deny Thor, but she could not help but offer countenance. “I love her. Perhaps that is easy to forget when you have not loved in such a way before, but know this: I would sooner burn before I promised all the worlds that I loved you. She will not be my mistress as you are bound to have your own. She is mine as I am hers and—“

“Then I shall plant the stake and light the torch.” Thor interrupted, gently placing his hands on her shoulders. “I do not doubt your love nor do I support our marriage. It is only a matter of fact that the only way for the two of you to be together as you wish is if Sif were to abandon any hope she had of ever reuniting with her family and if you were to discard your titles.”

Sigyn opened her mouth, prepared to argue that she was more than willing to give up her name, which she was. Let her be poor, at least she could be happy. Then she thought of Sif, her dear lover who spoke ill of her parents but adoringly of her brother. Sif who fought and braved poverty and shame to become the warrior she was. Even if and when she rose above her station and wore a title she earned herself, her marriage to Sigyn could cause her family to extend her disowned punishment for eternity.

Thor watched as the wicked truth overcame Sigyn once more and he gave her a small, sympathetic smile. “Till tomorrow, Lady Sigyn,” he bid her. Sigyn was glad he had stopped kissing her hand, for every time she was overcome with the urge to turn his perfect teeth with her knuckle.

His departure left Sigyn alone with the roses. Perhaps they had a better solution. She supposed she should wait by their wilting heads for a while and listen, just to be sure she didn’t miss their suggestions if they decided to speak.

“Dude, wake up.”

Something poked Loki’s cheek and he irritably pushed it away.

“Oi! Prince of Ass! Dick that wrecked my fucking ship!” Peter Quill’s angry taunts roused Loki from his resting state and he squinted up at the space-mortal from his spot on the ground.
His hands were still bound in front of him and he looked like he wanted to tear Loki into tiny pieces. “Oh good, you’re up. Do you just have a thing for danger and pissing people off? I think you do because most people, when they see a fucking black cloud of chaos, they fly away from it, not INTO IT!”

Loki sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face and recalling what had happened.

The ‘black cloud of chaos’ as Peter Quill called it was possibly the greatest magical anomaly Loki had ever seen. It wasn’t naturally occurring; someone, or something, had created it a very long time ago, perhaps even before Asgard was even a standing civilization. Yet, Peter Quill had not ever seen it and, upon approaching it, claimed that there was nothing in the direction they were going; it was dangerous to continue.

But the power drew Loki in. While Peter Quill, and seemingly the rest of the galaxy, shied away from it, Loki saw the storm for what it truly was and he couldn’t look away. It was truly glorious, a wonder that few would ever get the experience to see and survive. His magic was just enough to fortify Peter Quill’s ship against the sheer power of the anomaly. Although it was a portal, it was innately repelling. He could see it in both Quill and Darcy; they couldn’t feel the gravity of it. It warded them off because, had they not been accompanied by him, they would have been blown to dust.

His original intentions were to take them through the portal to where their coordinates indicated the infinity stone was. The possibility that the cloud was defending or perhaps even powered by a stone was quite a feasible notion and Loki was prepared to test it. His magic held steady so long as he focused.

Then Darcy happened.

Immediately, Loki stood up, glancing around the dark, empty terrain of where they’d fallen. The shattered husk of Peter Quill’s ship lay in ruin not five meters away and Fenrir was pacing worried circles around it.

“Darcy!” he shouted, stumbling uneasily to the fractured metal structure, his heart pounding in earnest. He was magically drained, which made even the basic functions difficult, but his dread of the state of his beloved mortal was enough to overpower any physical pain he could ever endure. Calling her name, he clawed at the jagged remains, listening intently for her response. Fenrir whined beside him as he tore away an especially large chunk of metal away, slicing his palms in the process.

“Loki, hey man, I’m sorry—“

Adrenaline fueled fear and rage burned his veins and he turned on Peter Quill, grabbing him by the collar and shaking him roughly. “Where is she?”

The young man’s mouth bent into an apologetic frown. “The second engine blew, it tore away and she slid out the back of the ship with your snake.”

Loki released him as the events of their crash returned to him.

It was his fault. It was all his fault.

The ship could have stayed together had he just kept his focus. But he had been distracted by Darcy. Her tiny gasp, the wondrous look in her eyes that told him she saw everything that she’d never been able to due to her mortal lack of magic.
He was Loki, and as Loki, beautiful women should not be enough to divert his attention from keeping them from dying.

But it hadn’t been just any beautiful woman. It had been Darcy Lewis; his ridiculous mortal who he believed had breached the barrier that separated her overall sense of magic and the will to use it. Most magic she could see because it was apparent and weak. The force of that cloud had such concentrated power that no unpracticed mortal would have been able to even acknowledge was anything but a collection of frightening gasses swarmed together in space.

But she had. She had done it. He witnessed the moment when her eyes brightened and her full lips parted at the majesty of all that she had been blind to.

It wasn’t her realization that broke his concentration, it was the events following.

When the second of her sight passed, her clear blue eyes rolled back in her head and she sunk to her knees.

Magic was a challenging tool. It was a muscle, meant to be exercised and pushed to reasonable boundaries until the owner’s capabilities grew.

Loki would have been able to see what Darcy had as a babe. But he was Asgardian. Darcy was a mortal. Magic was not so easy to learn for humans and Darcy never had any proper guidance. He never thought she would need it.

Then again, she was Darcy and she was always surprising him.

Using all of one’s energy too quickly has the potential to kill its conductor. He’d almost killed himself multiple times trying to accomplish spells that were too difficult at a young age before his magic had manifested enough to withstand the might of his will.

So, when Darcy fell to her knees, limp and losing consciousness, his focus on keeping the ship together was involuntarily sacrificed for the rescue of his ridiculous mortal.

In a matter of seconds, the ship fell to ruin and he remembered reaching for her as their worlds fell into chaos.

Loki clenched his fists, blood dribbling over his knuckles as he grappled at the frayed edges of his sanity.

Darcy could not be gone.

Gone without seeing all that she could. Gone without ever becoming president. Gone without ruling Asgard, or making all of the difference that she wanted to, or going to Culver. Gone after their petty fight. Gone without knowing how he loved her.

Fenrir whined loudly in obvious anguish. He made a hiss-like-howl and Loki willed it not to be true.

His magic was returning and he could feel the skin on his palms starting to heal. Bitter, all-encompassing, devastating sentiment yanked at the pit of his stomach and he wanted to raze whatever world he’d landed. To Hel with infinity stones. To Hel with Peter Quill and the storm.

He raised his hands glowing green with fury, prepared to show the portal just how destructive he could be. It was not the only thing in the universe that could cause irrevocable damage. Ire ravaged his grief, preparing it to pain him incessantly later. For now, he would scar all that he could lay
“Wait!” Peter Quill interrupted, walking to stand in front of Loki. His eyes were far too hopeful for how Loki was feeling. Did this stupid man not realize that he was attempting to cause severe chaos to avenge Darcy? Not that it would do any good, for he was the one at fault. To seek vengeance for Darcy would be to punish himself. But he could not even do that properly, for there was no greater torment than the loss of her.

Peter Quill kept talking anyways, holding out his cuffed hands in anticipation. “You said that black cloud thing was a portal, right? In your sleep you called it a portal. Is that true?”

Loki nodded, letting his head fall back and staring up at the stars. They mocked him still.

“Dude, maybe your girlfriend didn’t die! Maybe she just got through the portal and ended up somewhere else on this planet!” Quill encouraged, “And, while we’re out here, would you mind taking these off?” he nodded to his handcuffs.

Loki waved a hand and the binds dissipated in a green mist, his mind already on Darcy.

The dumb mortal man brought a valid point that threatened to tempt Loki with the beguiling call of hope.

Jörmungandr had fallen with Darcy into the portal. He wouldn’t let Darcy be hurt, this he knew.

And the portal…

Loki rushed to the ship debris, tearing his way to the console area where he was pleased in finding their map intact. From the mess he also procured Peter Quill’s map and he swallowed the desolation he felt at the markings made by Darcy. Would they be the last thing she ever wrote? Out of all her letters, all of the notes she left him and documents she published, would this be her last great work? A few lines on a spatially inaccurate sheet of paper?

He shook his head, pushing those thoughts away. She would be fine.

Peter Quill peered curiously over his shoulder. “Sooo, what’s the verdict and what’s the chance that you have five-hundred thousand units to pay for my Milano?”

Loki grimaced, deciding whether or not to trust Peter Quill. He didn’t need his help, however, he was being a very cooperative captive especially since Loki had crashed his ship and stranded them on a long lost world.

He sighed, looking to his ship. “I will fix it later.”

Quill’s gaze shifted from his wreck of a vehicle to Loki, kneeling in the dirt and reading a map of scribbles. “Uh, don’t get me wrong, you seem plenty smart and everything, but I don’t think you can fix that alone.”

“Well,” Loki muttered, carefully reading through the senseless words that were stuck together sporadically outside the galaxy. “I do not care what you think.”

“Touché.”

He sighed, studying the map, finding their location. Darcy’s estimations had worked, she’d navigated them correctly. The infinity stone was close.
At the moment, he couldn't care less about the infinity stone. Darcy was his treasure and he did not have a map to find her. He had an entire universe and the chance that she was somewhere in it and not doomed to the darkened pits of Helheim was verging on unlikely.

Breathing deeply, he glared at the stars, their bright forms shrouded in the haze from the foreboding cloud of energy. Even from his place on the ground, he could sense the portal’s power. Focusing on the portal he analyzed the severity of their situation.

If he was going to find Darcy, he would need to get off this damned planet.

His investigation into the portal was cut short when the nature of the energy dawned on him. He cursed in Allspeak, reverting to his native tongue, abandoning all magical influence on his language.

“What is it?” Peter Quill asked, stepping out of his ship, a music device in one hand and a brightly colored package in the other.

Loki was close to blowing universe to smithereens. He didn’t know how successful he would be, but he could try.

“We cannot leave,” he nearly growled, relaxing his fists so Fenrir could inspect his healed wounds. “At least not while the portal is functioning.”

Peter Quill’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Please tell me you’re fucking with me right now.”

“I am not,” Loki assured, standing up and kneading his brow. “It is a defense mechanism, a very good one at that. Its power is meant to ward off those who cannot withstand it. Additionally, it is a portal. Anyone attempting to reach this planet must know exactly how to penetrate the portal without letting it transport them to some estranged spot in the galaxy.”

“What does that have to do with us leaving?” Quill asked, now attaching his weapons back on his belt. “Assuming you can fix my ship, why can’t we just fly out?”

Loki wished Darcy was there, she would understand without his explanation. It dawned on him that if Darcy was…if Darcy had perished, truly gone from him, there would be no one in the world that understood him. He would not be able to explain his thoughts to anyone, for they would not have an inkling as to what he spoke of.

“It is a cyclone of sorts, constantly moving, spiraling infinitely inward. The center, or ‘the eye of the storm’ if you will, is where we entered and it is the central point of gravity. The entire portal is focused around this point.” Loki said, tossing aside Peter Quill’s map and Darcy’s last written words. She would write more. He would not give up on her yet. She would survive.

“So, it’s a one way path, right?” Quill simplified, crossing his arms. “We’re stuck here.”

“Yes,” Loki’s face screwed up in grim determination. “There might be a way to stop it.” A way to go find Darcy.

“Cool. How?” Quill asked rummaging through the debris for an odd headset which he fit behind his ear.

Loki clenched his jaw, folding the map of the infinity stones and carefully tucking it away inside his armor. He opened his mouth to answer Peter Quill’s question when something amongst the wreckage caught his eye.
Numb, he bent down and picked them up, holding them tightly in hand. Fenrir whined at the sky and Loki took several long seconds to focus his rage. With a tight throat, he growled an answer for Peter Quill.

“We find its source of power.”

***

Darcy felt like Thor used Mjolnir to turn her body into the Darcy Lewis rendition of ‘Whack-a-Mole’.

She groaned loudly, agonized by the well known sensation of sore muscles and bruises. Except they were everywhere and Loki wasn’t there to make them go away with his magic powers.

The thought of Loki caused her to gasp and sit up, her forehead bumping against the scaly green head of her serpent friend. “Frank,” she breathed as a sigh of relief, raising a hand to stroke his scales. “Where are we?”

He made a few noises, tongue flicking her nose briefly as she examined their surroundings. They were in an alley way of sorts, the passage was thin with just enough space for her to lay down in. The walls on either side of her were metal and the ground was warm to the touch. It was also incredibly filthy.

Foreign sounds rattled, clanged and screeched from the world outside her darkened crevice and she flinched away from them. Clearly she was in a city of sorts and the space she currently inhabited was either underground or in the slums. Darkness shrouded them so thickly that the only visible thing was the greenish smog that swarmed in a noxious cloud just above the ground.

She crinkled her nose in disgust and turned her attention back to Frank who looked just as confused as she was. “Loki isn’t here, is he?”

Frank whined, much like a dog would, and slithered his entire heavy length in her lap. He didn’t really fit, but Darcy needed his weight as reassurance that she wasn’t alone. The events leading up to her and Frank’s dismemberment from Loki, Fenrir and Peter Quill were quickly returning to her memory.

“God fucking dammit!” Darcy swore, scrubbing her hands over her face. “How could I be so stupid?! Jesus Christ, Frank, I lost Loki in space. The ship…”

Destruction flashed in her mind as she thought back to the moment of their separation, the blinding beauty of the storm…Loki’s voice calling after her. No doubt the ship had crashed, Loki along with it. Would the impact kill him? Or would the storm kill him?

She shook her head, chasing the idea away. He was Loki. He couldn’t die…not now. Not after they fought. Would he think that she didn’t love him? That they weren’t friends anymore? Did he die not knowing that he was her everything?

Inhaling deeply, she stared Frank in the eye. “He’s Loki, Frank. Right? He wouldn’t be stupid enough to let the storm kill him, would he?”

His nose touched hers and he offered another comforting lick.

“It was a portal,” Darcy recalled, her throat tight. “We were already almost through it before I
passed out. He would have made it, right?”

Another lick.

Darcy took a few calming breaths, placing a hand over her heart to press down the rising stress. She focused on different parts of her body and the dull pains that throbbed every so often, taking time to allow her nerves to settle. She needed to think less about whether Loki was alive and more on how to find him.

And to do that, she needed to know where she was.

With shaky limbs, she got to her feet, allowing Frank to wrap himself around her body. She still had both her swords and none of her bones felt broken. However, she would ask Loki to check out her organs for internal bleeding when she found him.

And she would find him.

Resolute in this fact, Darcy made to take a step forwards when her toe hit something hard and heavy. Curiously, she bent down to pick up one of Peter Quill’s hand-held weapons. It took her only a moment to make up her mind to belt it on, just above her swords.

Her heart rate slowed as she relaxed in her current position. The darkened alley ahead of her echoed with shouts of dangers and the challenges ahead. She and Frank shared a determined look as the uncertainty of the future dawned on them. “Are you ready for this?”

Frank licked her once in a quick, sure response. With a quick nod, they stepped into the abyss, Darcy’s thoughts on Loki. She would find him somehow, even if she had to fight her way out of nowhere.

***

Loki was going to murder Peter Quill.

He was a miserable complainer, a slow walker and he relished in telling tale after tale of his conquests in bed. While hearing very detailed accounts of his escapades with an ‘Askavarian’ woman made something deep inside him quiver with discomfort, they distracted him from thoughts of Darcy as they trudged across a deserted landscape.

The location at which they’d crashed had been fairly desolate with only sand and a few lonely boulders stretched across the horizon.

But as their progressed in their trek towards the location of the portal’s power source, they began to see signs of civilization.

At first it seemed incredibly odd to Loki that anyone should inhabit this land that was guarded by an ancient portal and home to a dangerous entity such as an infinity stone. It did not take him long to realize that the structures had long been abandoned and that the quaint little houses that perched on the ground like little birds in his mother’s water gardens, were nothing less than colossal edifices, sunken into the ground.

Great, columned monuments, stone masterpieces, gargantuan foundations built to support constructions the size of moons rose from the ground, crumbling and fading from existence. Normally, Loki would not be impressed by such archaic architecture. He was Asgardian. He lived amongst the greatest designers in the Nine Realms. While the variance in culture was fascinating, what made it more so was the size.
Asgardians were not small beings. They were not short and burly like dwarves or slight and willowy like the elves. They were similarly sized to mortals, but paid more care to their living space. Even the lower class lived in some state of grandeur.

Yet even Asgard’s opulence could not compare to the land’s magnificence.

Everything was enormous. A Frost Giant would say that Ymir would be naught but an ant compared to the beings that shaped together this dead civilization. It was clear that the builders were larger than most when they came upon the first structures. It was only when they entered the city did the majesty of its greatness truly begin to show.

Loki wished Darcy were there to see it. She would love the swirling colors of the galaxies spinning above them and the way space seemed to expand with every step taken further into the crumbling city. He willed himself to believe that she would see this one day.

Loki could feel the magical essence of the infinity stone through the ancient decaying structures. Even over the great distance, its power screamed at him. The essence of the stone felt very different from the Aether; they were two entirely different entities. While the Aether was parasitical and encompassing of the mind, the sensation Loki detected now was just…powerful. If Darcy were there, she would not be able to feel it’s presence quite yet. But she would have understood his meaning and her magical perception was so keen it was nearly intuitive.

Even so, it made sense to him now why Bor had gone through so much trouble to create a dimension in which to hide the Aether. Any sorcerer with even the briefest training in magical sensory would be able to detect its existence.

The previous inhabitants of this land would have been able to feel it.

Their venture through the city was interesting. They must have walked more than several Midgardian kilometers by now. Loki always walked fast, though usually he slowed down for Darcy since she was mortal and her legs were shorter. But now, he had only Peter Quill and Fenrir to be concerned about. Fenrir was completely at peace with their pace, even speeding up at times like he sensed something, then retreating again and Loki couldn’t care less whether Peter Quill got tired and couldn’t walk any longer. The only thing that truly bothered him was his incessant talking about bedding women.

If Loki wished, he could speak about bedding both women and men. However, he did not because he had no reason to speak of that to Peter Quill. Did Peter Quill need to know of his skills in bed? No. No he did not. Loki was a prince. A well mannered, sharp witted prince who liked to keep some mystery to his life.

Surprisingly enough, Quill kept up. They walked, and although he presented some signs of fatigue, it was not much. Loki was still deciding whether or not he was completely mortal. Part of him was, but it was highly probable that one of his parents had been something other than human. Loki found this interesting, for he did not know that different races could breed.

Perhaps their spawn would only come out as odd mutts like Peter Quill.

He thought back to Angrboða and her children and quickly changed his mind. Peter Quill could be a category all his own.

“…then she threw a rodent at my head! It was crazy! She was a good lay though. Had a funny birthmark on her ass. Wish I could remember her name.” Quill sighed in reminiscence of his past bedmates as they came to a large plaza-like area. Gargantuan towers constructed of smooth stone
and ancient, deteriorating metals loomed over them as they descended a crumbling flight of stairs. It took several long paces to reach the end of each individual step where, to avoid the steep drop, Loki transported them to the next. He wouldn’t dare take them any further. He needed all his magic if he was going to defend his being against another infinity stone.

“But, hey, I’ve gotta move on. I can’t be tied down, you know what I mean?” Quill asked, jogging to keep pace behind Loki as they tread across the stairs. “Speaking of moving on, do you know where we are? Because so far we’ve only been walking in one direction. And I might start listening at music at some point; you are a horrible conversationalist. Do you even know what kind of people lived here? Other than, like, them being really fucking tall.”

Loki magicked them to the bottom of the stairs and continued walking towards the source of power. He believed that it was the Infinity Stone that powered the portal. If he could get the stone, he could turn off the portal and they’d be free to go.

Still, Peter Quill brought up his main query as to who this dead and hidden civilization belonged to. Loki had been theorizing that it was the land of the Celestials. His suspicions were confirmed at the bottom of the stairs where a massive wall stretching along the edge of the square. Writing was etched onto the deteriorating surface. Loki could only read it if he stepped back far enough that the entire phrases were in his line of sight.

Allspeak did not include Celestian. He and Darcy had to learn it by themselves. It had taken a long time for him to develop any kind of fluency in it. The language was so old that it had no root. The structure was made up of sayings and comparisons of creatures and things unknown to the living world. It was somehow elegant in its many colloquialisms that had troubled his learning of it.

Darcy had struggled as well. The map was gibberish, but identifying the Celestian words was necessary for deciphering locations.

Though it had been almost too long since he and Darcy practiced conversing in the ancient tongue, he could still read the words inscribed on the wall. He read the words aloud, smirking a bit at their meaning.

For once, Peter Quill said nothing, only gaping quietly at the young prince. Loki turned to him curiously. “Yes?”

“Dude,” Quill said in a disbelieving undertone. “Be real with me here. Is that Celestian?”

“Yes,” Loki said, reading over the wall again. “A dead language, much like the race.”

Quill snorted. “Yeah, no shit. The closest anyone has ever come to understanding anything about the Celestials is emptying their head-guts out and using them for science.”

Loki made a face and Peter Quill held up his hands defensively. “I know it sounds crazy, but people will pay four million units for just a few drops of brain goo from Knowhere. The fact that you can read it…can most people do that from wherever the hell you come from?”

Shaking his head, Loki tried to make sense of Peter Quill’s words. “No. Darcy can. It was…challenging…to learn. She spent the more time cursing the words rather than trying to read them…” he trailed off, his heart clenching with the reminder of Darcy’s possible death.

“Your relationship confuses me, man,” Peter Quill stated as they stood facing the Celestian script. Fenrir sat at their feet, panting heavily as he had not stopped running in the hour they’d been traveling. “I mean, you obviously get it a lot, or have in the past, and your girlfriend is getting it
from other girls. Which is hot. Unfortunate for you, but good for her.”

Loki clenched his jaw. “We are not courting.”

Peter Quill rolled his eyes. “See, this is how I know you haven’t been laid in forever. You have a pole up your ass. You’re so uptight.”

Sighing exasperatedly, Loki kneaded his brow. “Is there a purpose to your words or do you simply enjoy the sound of your own voice?”

“Both,” Quill retorted. “Look man, I’m just saying that you guys have some serious chemistry. I should know, I’m all about chemistry. Speaking of which, Lokester... can I call you Lokester?”

“No.”

“Lokester, you have got to tell me some of your moves, man. Like, how’d you get so good?” Peter Quill inquired admiringly.

“It is unimportant,” Loki said, bringing his attention back to the Celestian words. They were very close.

Quill huffed in disappointment. “Fine, crash my ship, strand me on some weird ass planet and don’t give me any sex tips. I see how it is….Lokester.”

Loki contemplated telling Jörmungandr to eat the dear Star-Lord just for fun when he remembered that Jörmungandr was with Darcy...alive somewhere in the galaxy.

“Fine, if you won’t tell me how to be a god in bed, at least cough up what the Celestian says.” Quill insisted, giving Loki’s shoulder a shove.

The prince crossed his arms, making up his mind to take them forwards. “There is no direct translation for it. It is a public warning.”

Peter Quill squinted at the sign. “A warning for what?”

Loki raked his gaze across the empty, rotting city and its hollow, still air. The vastness of the place made it somehow emptier. “Death.”

“Oh.” Peter Quill swallowed roughly. “Awesome.”

Nodding, mainly to himself, Loki read through the phrases, warning of Celestian extinction, once more. If Darcy were there, he would have wanted to know the answer to one of history’s greatest inquiries: How did the Celestials, the most powerful race ever known to exist, suddenly die, leaving behind only six little rocks in their place. But Darcy was not there and in her absence, the mysteries of the universe were better left unsolved.

He turned away from the text, beginning to walk again. “Come. We are close.”

***

“The middle of Knowhere.”

Darcy grimaced at the purplish hued fellow with four eyes who she’d decided to ask directions from. Her and Frank had managed to find their way out of the alley easily enough. It only took a few minutes to find some light source and then high-tail it out of there.
Then things got a little crazy.

They were indeed in the middle of a city and there didn’t seem to be any rules whatsoever. In the middle of the square she stood in now, there were several large pools of toxic looking yellow slime. The bar not a few paces away had a main attraction that involved placing bets on rodents being eaten by an even larger rodent.

There was so much going on and Darcy wished she could see it all; maybe there was something she was missing that could help her find Loki.

He would get a kick out of this place. There was trouble everywhere and with even the slightest touch of mischief this place could go from city of sin to absolute chaos in a matter of seconds.

The problem was that she couldn’t figure out where the hell she was because everyone she asked just said she was in ‘nowhere’.

“The middle of nowhere,” Darcy repeated incredulously, staring up at the man. He wore a sleeveless coat with a lot of buckles and his arms looked thicker than Thor’s head. “Could you be any more specific?”

Mr. Purple’s bulging muscles twitched in annoyance and he blinked, one eye right after the other. “What? You want coordinates too?” he asked rudely.

Darcy fit her hands on her hips, Frank shifting to flick his tongue at the possible offender. “Yeah, that’d be great actually.”

Clearly, manners weren’t commonplace in the middle of nowhere. Mr. Purple barked a rough laugh, pushing past her and making his way into the hoard of people. “Stupid girl, doesn’t even know what Knowhere is.”

Darcy gripped her sword, ready to go Asgardian and start a fight when her sight fell onto a tattered billboard over a dilapidated looking storefront.

“Welcome to Knowhere.” Darcy read aloud, cocking her hip to the side. “Well, how about that.”

Frank opened his mouth in something with semblance of a hopeful smile. As miserable as their situation was, she couldn’t help but smile back. She knew that Frank was just as worried and as scared as she was, but he still tried to make her feel better. Overcome by a sudden rush of affection for her snake, she pet his head, swallowing hard and willing herself not to cry. “Come on, let’s see if we can get a vehicle. If we can get to the coordinates we lost Loki at, we can figure out what to do then.”

Purposefully, she made her way to that sketchy bar she’d seen earlier with the rodent betting.

It was crowded. People of all shapes, sizes, colors and smells milled about, shouting taunts at one another in several different languages. Darcy understood them, but they spoke so informally that it was difficult for her to truly comprehend what they were communicating exactly.

The atmosphere was cramped and although the scent was foreign, Darcy could still determine that the humid, moist texture of the air was a product of sweaty bodies and drink. People, mostly men (or at least she thought they were men) were screaming at the rodent table, cheering on little rat-looking things before they were eaten by an even larger rat-looking thing.

She decided she’d name the big one ‘Odin’ because one of its eyes was a yellow-golden color and the other one was missing.
Odin the Rodent was happily munching on one of its little inferiors as Darcy proceeded to the bar, halting in her tracks when a disheveled man with a series of green tattoos running down his yellow arms was thrown down in front of her, shoved away by a man with deep blue skin, two beady eyes and a smarmy smile.

“Stay down, whelp,” he growled, retreating to the bar where he turned his attention upon a seemingly scared girl with a round-pink face. She was probably the cleanest thing in the room and Darcy got the feeling that these people weren’t her preferred company. She said something to the man, as if trying to persuade him, but he only laughed and moved uncomfortable close to her.

Darcy moved to the bar, a few stools down, waving her arm to get the attention of the bartender. If need be, she would step in. But she didn’t want to cause any more commotion than need be. Being outside of Yggdrasil was untried grounds. There was so little interference between the Galaxy Beyond and the Nine Realms that she was unsure of how violent interactions would influence that relationship.

The bartender, a woman with teeth like needles and a shrill voice asked her what she wanted to drink. Darcy shook her head, shouting over the noise. “Do you know where I can get a ship?!”

Her needle-teeth flashed and she flipped several thick, ropey locks of green hair out of her face. “You go to my sister, Nkarya, she sell you ship. Six thousand units.”

Darcy made a face, thinking about the lack of currency on her person. Thievery was always an option, but once again she ran into unpleasant interactions between Yggdrasil and the Galaxy. Loki wouldn’t worry about it, mischief would tempt him and chaos would ensue. She cursed herself for being careful. Then again, Loki had the insurance of magic to save his ass, not to mention he was a much better liar.

She addressed the barmaid with a negotiating tone, “Is there any way I would be able to buy it on a loan?”

The barmaid was silent for a moment before screeching a piercing laugh. “You want to borrow ship? Give money later?”

Darcy smirked, leaning on the bar, Frank coiling around her body. “That’s the idea.”

The woman laughed harder. “You have no money. You go now. No money, no drink, no ship.” She turned away from her, moving down the bar to tend to the bar’s rowdy occupants. “You go.”

“Wait!” Darcy called over the noise. “You don’t understand, I need a ship!”

She made a sound at Darcy, followed by an apparently rude hand gesture. “This is Knowhere! You are thief, no? Thief steal ship, why you ask? You go or I make call.”

Darcy was about to protest when the barmaid added an insult under her breath that roughly translated to ‘Stupid girl’ but Darcy got the feeling that it was a great deal cruder than the phrase implied. She left again and Darcy felt it best to relent.

Odin the Rodent was gnawing on the bones of its most recent victim, the crowd around him cheering drunkenly. Her chest was uncomfortably tight with the realization of her helplessness. Loki could be anywhere. He might not have made it to the other side of the portal. He could have taken a trip to Helheim instead, if such a thing happens after death.

“Stay positive, Darce,” she muttered to herself, casting a sideways look at the pink girl. The beady-eyed guy had backed off and was listening intently to something she was saying. Just to seem less
conspicuous Darcy picked up a tankard from the bar and swirled the contents, idly listening in on their conversation.

“...If you would be willing to sell it, my employer would pay handsomely for it. If it is not money you seek, he would like to make a trade,” she said coolly and Darcy got the impression that negotiating business deals wasn’t something this girl was familiar with doing. Or maybe she was and it terrified her.

The man glared skeptically. “Who is your employer?”

“That is classified,” the pink girl said timidly, folding her hands in her lap atop a white skirt, “May I see the object?”

His hand, bulky and with four fingers, twitched towards his breast pocket instinctually. “Wait, I don’t know about this. How much am I going to get?”

“My employer is generous,” the girl assured hastily, glancing around nervously.

Darcy sipped her drink and instantly spit it back out. Whatever she just drank, it wasn’t Asgardian ale. The blue skinned man sneered, standing up to leer over the lady. “I won’t show it in here. Outside.”

That demand reeked of bullshit. Darcy waited for the girl to tell this asshole to take a hike, but she only nodded and stood up, letting him lead the way out of the bar.

Frank made a distressed sound and Darcy looked to him, pained. “Frank, we are not vigilantes, understand? This is a one time thing. Don’t give me that look. We are trying not to piss off the galaxy. We’ll help out this chick because that guy is a douche and we are not assholes. Then we’ll see if her employer wants to trade everlasting gratitude for a functioning ship.”

They nodded to one another and Darcy promptly pushed her way out of the bar, elbowing her way past sweaty people gathering around a brawl that had broken out over the death of Odin the Rodent’s last kill.

In the air hundreds of ships were flying around, mocking her with their mobility. She noticed that few were as nice as Peter Quill’s. All of them, and the entirety of Knowhere, seemed to be in some kind of cover, like the city was encased in a giant shelter. In the distance, she could make out a blurry dark spot that looked like it could be space. It was hard to be sure without her glasses.

Even in the fuzzy mess that was her vision, she saw the pink girl follow Big-Bad-and-Blue around a corner and into an alley.

She followed as stealthily as possible and in her mind she heard Loki teasing her efforts. A sharp pang of worry threatened to take her over, but she forced herself to continue on. She would find him.

Through the shadows, away from the din of the streets, Darcy trailed behind them, watching as they entered a shabby building. It appeared to be part of a complex working of structures, pieced together from sheets of metal and miscellaneous scraps of materials unknown to Darcy.

Slipping through the door, Darcy grasped the hilt of her sword questioningly. The place seemed to be abandoned; she would only have to fend off the one guy. But it wouldn’t be a fair fight and she didn’t know how experienced these people were with sword fighting.

It was cramped inside, though very empty and very dark save a light at the end of the hall where
the pink girl looked up at the imposing blue guy. “My employer is very interested in what you have.”

“Then your employer can come and negotiate himself,” he snarled, cracking all eight of his knuckles, “Now, take me to him. I’ve seen you come in and out of this part of Knowhere, talking people out of their valuables…you and your ‘employer’. He’s gotta be loaded by now, yeah?”

The pink girl trembled, pulling out a smallish gun which he quickly knocked away. It flew in Darcy’s direction and Frank caught it in his mouth, swallowing the weapon whole. Mr. Blue, who had been ready to get mad at the girl, stopped when he didn’t hear the gun hit the floor.

Darcy narrowed her eyes at Frank, heaving a long sigh before drawing her swords and stepping into the light. “Hi. I’m Darcy. I don’t really like hurting people, so, maybe we could negotiate—”

Her words were cut short by the blue guy aiming a solid punch at her arm.

“Shit, that smarts!” she swore, her swords clattering to the ground. How long had it been since she practiced? Too long. Sif was going to beat her ass the next time they fought.

He laughed. “Go home stupid girl, I’m doing business.”

Darcy was pretty fed up at this point. Loki was lost, she was lost and stranded in the middle of Knowhere, she smelled like a sewer, and everyone was calling her stupid. She didn’t have the patience to put up with this jerk too. Darcy’s face screwed up into a bitter expression, pulling Peter Quill’s weapon from her belt as the guy turned back to the pink girl.

“Hey,” she called, making his ears twitch in annoyance. “Go do business elsewhere.”

When she fired, it wasn’t bullets that struck the man, but rather projectiles made of electricity. The nodes attached to his chest and Darcy watched in amazement as he did a little dirt dance before falling unconscious.

“Bitchin’,” she said admiringly, smiling down at the super-charged-space-taser. “I have got to get me one of these!”

“Thank you.”

Darcy’s attention was immediately drawn away from one of her new favorite toys and to the pink girl who stood with her back against the wall. She bent down to pick up her swords and stow them safely in their sheaths, petting Frank on the head. “Oh, hey, no prob. That guy was a dick. Don’t follow big men from sketchy bars. Even if it is for business.”

She looked down at her feet and Darcy realized that this person was probably older than her; she was taller at least.

“I must. I have no choice,” the pink girl said, getting down to her knees and gently pulling from the unconscious man’s pocket a small black bag. It could have been a coin purse, only when the girl opened it she procured, not money, but a handful of knucklebones. She smiled a little, putting them back in the bag and slipping them into her pocket. “My name is Dajiri. I owe you my thanks. And…my protection back as well?”

Frank chose that moment to burp loudly in Darcy’s ear and she gave Dajiri a sympathetic look. “I’m really sorry. Usually he doesn’t eat metal, but he must’ve been super hungry.”

Frank opened his mouth in a very wide smile that might have been horrifying if he had teeth. He
Nonetheless, Dajiri took a step back. “That kind of creature…I have not seen anything like it. And
that is saying something, considering I work for—“ She stopped speaking abruptly, swallowing
hard. “What do you want?”

Darcy frowned at her apparent fear; she wouldn’t last a second on Asgard. “I need a ship. Or some
kind of flying vehicle that will get me out of the galaxy.” Dajiri’s eyes widened, but Darcy
continued. “Will your employer be willing to help me?”

“Are you from out of the galaxy then?” Dajiri asked with a kind of shy eagerness. “Have you ever
been to the Worlds Beyond? Terra? The golden lands?”

“Well, I sure as hell am not from around here.” Darcy told her, gesturing to her armor and Frank.
“What will your employer take in exchange for what I need?”

Dajiri shook her head, eyes wide and misty. “I am not sure. He will want to discuss with you, I
think. Come. I will take you to him.”

She waved for Darcy to follow her from the building and Darcy did so, keeping her hands on her
swords. Once they were outside, a question made its way into her mind. “Dajiri, what’s your
employer’s name?”

Dajiri hesitated a moment, contemplating whether or not to answer. Finally, she pulled her aside
and speaking in a whisper.

“The collector, Taneleer Tivan.”

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“Dude, this has bad news written all over it.”

Loki ignored Peter Quill, steepling his fingers over his lips in thought.

They had traveled several thousand miles through the city which Loki determined was only a small
portion of the Celestial’s land. Their vastness made travel inconvenient for Loki. He was working
with limited time and no Darcy.

He had enough magic to take Quill, himself, and Fenrir several miles forwards at a time without
trouble. However, the infinity stone was harder to track. If he took them too far forwards, Loki
would lose the trace. One would think that merely sensing it would be enough, but it was not.

He needed the specific location and the power of the stone seemed to have seeped into the dusty
earth of the land. It was as if the entire city was burning and he was searching for the cause of the
flame. If Darcy were there, she would understand.

Even without her, Loki managed to find a more general area at which he believed the stone could
be.

The very center of the Celestian city was more alive than his flesh and blood. The buildings were
corpses, long since passed, crumbling to dust before his eyes. Yet each one was animated by a
network of power, energy that linked their stone tissue and cracking vertebrate. A power unlike any
other survived the dead streets which Loki could hardly determine for the sheer appalling size of
the world.
And in this dead center, the heart with no beat thumped with the influence of an infinity stone. Loki could sense its presence, inlaid in the one whole building that had not fallen to a ruinous wreck overtime. He could tell why, the thing was fortified against time. It was a beast, massive construct and monstrous in demeanor. The outside walls’ glimmer was dull purple in the dusty air that clouded around them like smoke. Doors and floors comprised of shy sparkles, speckles of glittering gemstones, each dim glowing flake the length of Fenrir’s body. They stacked together, their dense appearance forming a polished slate.

Loki imagined the grand might have shined in the past, but now, its former glory was coated in a thick layer of dust and abandonment.

It was not built to be beautiful, this much Loki could tell. From a distance, he observed there were no windows, no intricacies or decoration. To the average Celestian, Loki supposed it might have appeared to be no more than a large, purple, brick shaped building.

Even so, looks weren’t everything, for while it was fairly unimpressive in design, energy radiated from it’s every cell. Condensed inside this modest monument was enough power to raze the galaxy. Peter Quill might not have been able to feel it, but Loki and Fenrir could. If Darcy and Jörmungandr were there, they would be able to sense it as well.

Loki touched the coarse wall, the tips of his fingers gathering dust from the deep violet surface. The stone seemed to tingle and with the slightest brush of his magic, it revealed a tall, rectangular door that rumbled and groaned as Loki magically pushed it open.

The darkness inside seemed to suck the air from around them, as if the nefarious construction was truly a monster that had been suffocating for an eternity. The acrid stench of the black, stale space within stank of hunger and emptiness.

Quill pulled the device behind his ear, an odd mask forming over his face. “Woah, hold up, Princess. You’re not going in there alone.”

Loki and Fenrir looked at one another then back at Peter Quill. Loki addressed him offhandedly. “Indeed. Fenrir shall accompany me. Stay here.”

Peter Quill grabbed Loki’s shoulder in protest. “Hey, I’m serious. This place is creepy as hell. We don’t even know what’s in there and you’re ready to go in by yourself with, what? A couple of knives? How old are you? Eighteen? Nineteen?”

“Two thousand and six,” Loki responded absently.

“You look good for your age,” Quill said, unphased. “You’re not mortal though. Your girlfriend is mortal. She can’t be any older than, what, twenty?”

“Sixteen,” Loki corrected, kneeling beside Fenrir to examine the map while Peter Quill choked on his words.

“Dude! Talk about age difference! How does that work?”

Loki traced the gibberish written in Celestian that surrounded the isolated area that represented their current location. “My people live much longer than Midgardians. I equate to her age in mortal years.”

Peter Quill scrubbed a hand over his face. “I asked a sixteen year old guy for sex tips. I need a moment to process this.”
Loki sighed exasperatedly and gave a tiny smile when Fenrir licked his nose. “You will have plenty of time to think on it. Stay here. I have warded the door, attempting to enter is pointless. If you die, it is of no consequence to me.”

Peter Quill held out his hands defensively. “Have you no conscience at all? Who the fuck says shit like that?”

Loki stood, flipping the map in his fingers, the sheet of paper turning into his daggers which he took dexterously between his fingers. “Be thankful, Star Lord, for I am the god of lies and that was a truth and a warning.”

Peter Quill grumbled to himself a few rude words as Loki faced the darkness, stepping into its shadowed depths. He considered casting a light to set the world he now walked in to a visual sense. But the smell, the acrid stench of abandonment and waste was so potent, accompanied by the lurid pull of the infinity stone, Loki decided against it. He needn’t see to know where he was going and some things were better left unseen.

Ephemeral ignorance became his for the time it took him to navigate the unknown. Fenrir stayed close to his side throughout their walk, his fur tickling Loki’s fingers as a comforting reminder that he was not alone with the mystery of the Celestials’ extinction. Their secrets awaited him in the gloom that was so dank and black that it masked even the largest of clues. Loki let them be, closing his eyes and attempting to eliminate the empty scent from his senses. Emptiness would not find Darcy.

It was incredibly daunting, to be lost in the dark, grappling with his sense of magic, clawing after a power that radiated through the room’s night.

All was well, for Loki feared not the dark. All that awaited him was a new discovery. He feared the loss of his beloved mortal and her inability to make discoveries with him. If that instance were to truly occur, deaths, that void everyone so fears, would be no stranger to him.

It was upon this revelation that Loki began to hear voices, very faint and very distant as if spoken by a tiny phantom from the days before Asgard prospered. Fenrir whined as more joined in, the whispers of invisible ghosts filling their ears with the shrill, ancient sound of melancholy and the quiet retelling of the Celestian downfall.

Their words melded together like light. Colors indecipherable to even him reigned as ghosts in the blackness, gathering their fleets to fight against the dark cover that kept him ignorant of their truths.

He was the neutral party.

Loki could feel long dormant magic stirring around him, ancient powers rising up from the ground and screaming at him in their hushed tones.

But he made no effort to decipher their words nor their endeavors to capture his attention. He ignored that, extending his magic past that residual power of the Celestials. They were close now; the infinity stone was near enough that he could taste it.

It was power. Pure, untainted power. It was magic of its own breed, like the Aether was. But this one was unique. From it, Loki sensed no immediate malcontent. It was not a parasite and it was not as intelligent. If anything, it reminded him a little of Thor. Powerful, enthusiastic, and violent. It did not have the desires of the Aether, it did not want a subject of which to cling to.

Loki could only determine that it wanted to be free. It wanted to be used, to be placed on a pedestal.
and let its essence radiate over the universe.

The stone was purple blood in the dark waters where Loki and Fenrir prowled.

The distance between them and the infinity stone was still so great that at the rate he and Fenrir were moving, they would not reach it for another several hours. Before, in crossing through the city and outside terrain, Loki magically transported himself, Peter Quill, and Fenrir over what could have taken months to cover. It would be simple for Loki to take them directly to the stone, but he hesitated.

The whispers had quieted, yet the magic remained. The unknown was a trick Loki had not yet mastered. What awaited in it, and beyond it, was a mystery.

Death was nothing to fear. At least not yet, he’d been given no reason to fear it.

But Darcy could still be alive and the dead and the living never met.

As long as there was hope that Darcy Lewis was breathing, he would not die; he would always have breath for her to take away.

With every bit of conviction in his body, Loki gripped his dagger, summoning forth his magic to take him and Fenrir as close to the stone as he dared.

They appeared again in the same pitch black they’d been strolling through before, only now the stone was nearer.

In fact, Loki had brought them right before the stone. He could sense it. But he could not reach it. The emptiness had stretched to all of his senses. He could not taste the dust in the air or smell the starving belly or this monstrous building. He could not feel the chill or see his own hand in front of his face.

He sighed, resolving his previous decision to remain free of the answer to the Celestial’s extinction. Let him see what he must to get Darcy back.

Determinedly, he cast a light over his head, the bright, golden glow rising his above his head and, for the first time, illuminating the dark cavern in which the Celestial’s had hidden one of the infinity stones.

What the light revealed to him, he had been unprepared for.

Lain before him, with its arms extended and body strewn was the petrified corpse of a Celestial.

Loki gazed upon it in awe, wishing his eyes were large enough to see the entire body, for its head alone could have housed an entire city. Its skin was gray, its massive arms stretched out on either side of his path. One hand was clenched into a fist so tightly, Loki wondered if the Celestian had been clinging to life when it had died.

The face looked neither feminine nor masculine, though it was wrinkled and was fairly humanoid. Lanky, gray, dust filled hair clumped atop its head and it appeared to be clothed in what remained of what was probably once majestic, empowering armor. Its chin rested on the stone ground, its colossal face angled to a raised platform not three paces from where Loki stood.

He took a step forwards, causing Fenrir to give an objecting whine. Loki rubbed his ears reassuringly. “Be at peace, Fenrir. We must find Darcy and Jörmungandr. Do not fret, all is well.”
At his comforting words, Fenrir relaxed, though still stayed close to Loki’s side as if glued there. Loki stowed his dagger, cautiously approaching the pedestal, the orb of golden light hovering over his head like a beacon of hope. Its long tendrils of gold danced across the pedestal that looked as though it had been built for a being his size rather than that of a Celestial.

Without halting to reconsider his options, Loki stepped onto the platform, widening his stance to stand face to face with the corpse.

Or so he thought.

Suddenly, the world seemed to shift as Loki’s vision of reality morphed into something entirely different.

The Celestian before him began to move as if Loki standing on the platform had awoken it from some great slumber. Its prodigious face squirmed, clumps of dust the size of Loki’s longship falling in chunks from its cheeks and nose, a series of sand storms spinning into existence with the rapid batting of its inordinate lashes.

Loki’s heart raced as he stared, open mouthed at the awakening of a legend. A living mystery, a spark of life left alone in this abandoned, secluded sector of the universe.

No…not abandoned…hidden. This being gasping for air before him was a secret, protected by a portal of impossible measure and a crumbling maze of a city.

Loki had reached the center and had found, like any maze, his passage out of the puzzle.

The Celestian coughed and sputtered and Loki considered conjuring it an extremely large glass of water. Gods knew how long they’d been asleep. Waiting for some lost soul to step onto the pedestal. The force of their breaths was enough to blow him away, but he held his ground, magically securing himself and Fenrir to the floor and willing himself to endure the wretched stench of age that came with this decrepit creature.

Finally, it lifted its head from the ground, its large golden eyes that outshone Loki’s orb of light coming to rest urgently on Loki’s defensively poised figure. When it blinked, the room darkened. Comparing his orb to their golden globes would have been like comparing a candle flame to a sun.

It gasped, drawing its tremendous arms towards its body, the motion causing the earth under Loki’s feet to shake and vibrate. Even so, he held his stance as the Celestial closed in on him, great gray lips parted in disbelief.

“Unbelievable,” The Celestial said, its voice low and ancient. Loki could feel the individual thrum of its vocal chords in his soul, the ancient language registering in his mind immediately.

Loki squared his shoulders, lifting his chin to the primordial being. “The impossible does not believe in disbelief.”

The Celestial nodded its massive head, eyes unmoving from Loki. “The prophecy…a disguised man…a liar…a prince of two lands…”

Loki leaned forwards, battling the wind of the Celestial’s cold breath. “A riddle speaks you in mastered time.”

The Celestial did not acknowledge his words, continuing to speak on in frantic exigency, the fingers of its one hand cracking the solid dirt of the ground.
“Born again by mother’s blood, a liar with love for the law ...falling, falling, dropped by raven’s claw.

The mad...the mad grows his madness, break his chest and fill it with wretchedness, freed only by death’s sadness.

Set free your beasts, the end of all ends be it the case, Chaos holds soul, power, reality, mind, time and space, save the living race.

Might will fight and Might might fall, thunder’s clash save them all.

Queens and Mothers win the war, carry love worth fighting for.

To the little one, seek and seek. Promise to you, he will not be weak.”

The Celestial ended its prophecy with a rough cough and a steady glare on Loki’s face. It trembled and Loki held out his hands, silently asking if he could help. The Celestial only blinked its massive eyes, sending Loki into darkness for a terrifying second.

“A Trickster is not a fool and cannot fool power. Take it...take it...TAKE IT!” The Celestial shouted at him, and Loki feared his ears may be perpetually damaged.

He looked to the Celestial, prepared to tell it that he did not know what he was supposed to be taking when it raised its enormous fist in the air, the one that had been clenched so tightly, and opened it far above Loki’s head.

From its gray and ancient palm fell a textured metallic sphere that Loki caught in his waiting hand. He evaluated the object inquisitively under the expectant glare of the Celestial. “Open, be it so.”

Loki lightly traced his fingers over the device, not even needing his magic to find the weak points on its surface and sliding the different panels apart. It was a puzzle, easily solved with a light hand and deft fingers. With a final twist, the sides of the sphere came apart to reveal the object of his miseries and his reason for other-worldly excursions.

The Power Stone.

It was purple and it hummed with the same violent enthusiasm he’d felt before. But unlike his encounter with the Aether, he was strong enough to handle it. The power did not overwhelm him and he found that he could close his bare hand around the stone, feeling its awe-inspiring force, without being subject to its aggressive demands.

The Celestial grinned, its mouth physically cracking in two.

It was a horrific sight to witness the final decay of something so old and to hear their last words as it fell into nonexistence. “Behold, The Insignificant savior, bring glory to those who wear it better. Behold, The Shadow.”

Loki took a step back, his fingers brushing over Fenrir’s back as the Celestial crumbled. Great, gray arms blew to dust and its face fell apart in chunks. Loki extinguished his light as the Celestian shut its big golden eyes for the last time.

With a quick wave of his hands, he stowed the stone and its container in a dimensional pocket of space, a quick trick he learned a while back, and ran from the cloud of dust. It was when he heard the tell-tale grumble of the building that now verged on collapse, did he use his magic to take him and Fenrir to the site of their crash, stopping for only a second to grab Peter Quill.
Loki should have felt drained from the amount of magic he was using, but he was not. He repaired Peter Quill’s ship with a few distracted flicks of his fingers as he watched the portal in the sky deteriorate and the ground around them disintegrate.

Peter Quill swore as they boarded his ship and Loki pointed at the newly recreated cockpit. “Get us out of here Star-Lord.”

“Yes sir, Your Highness,” Quill said with a surprising amount of sincerity. He took off just in time for the ground under the Milano to fall to ruin and Loki realized that the Power stone had truly been the only thing keeping this land together.

It was a melancholy thought, but Loki could hardly be troubled with that. His thoughts remained, as they usually did, on Darcy. She was somewhere in the Galaxy…alive. He could feel it in his bones.

He would find her, no matter the cost.

***

Taneleer Tivan was a hoarder. Darcy knew that much for sure.

Dajiri had led her through a maze of crowded shanties, old industrial equipment, and toxic pools of some yellow-green waste. By the time they reached the entrance to her employer’s digs, Darcy was panting from exertion. Loki was Asgardian. He had no trouble with wearing forty pounds of leather everywhere he went. He managed to make it look hot.

Dajiri wasn’t so good. Her feet were killing her before they made it to Mr. Tivan’s little hoarder corner of the universe.

Dajiri had led her inside and to the strangest, most inhumane kind of collection she’d ever seen in her life.

Glass cells, thousands…millions of them, of all shapes and sizes, lined the walls. They hung from the ceiling and scattered the floors in a crude rainbow of foggy cages. It was chaotic, disorderly, and, quite frankly, horrifying. For the boxes were not just of odd shaped boulders and rare plants.

The cases contained creatures. Living ones. Humanoid figures and golden retrievers in space suits, half-dead and sedated sentient beings locked behind glass walls. Dajiri didn’t give them a second glance, her little white skirt stiff as ever it was as she made her way through the many jailed creatures.

Darcy shivered as they passed a tank holding a gigantic, docile looking fish. It didn’t look like it was from Earth, it was too large. But it didn’t belong here either. It’s forehead bumped against the glass and Darcy could see a large sore there, infected in the filthy water. Large, grey scales, not ones Darcy would ever describe as beautiful, had spots of green mold growing around them.

Frank buried his face in her hair, blocking the horrendous view from his sight. Darcy didn’t blame him.

Dajiri stopped them before one of the large desks, littered with contraptions Darcy couldn’t even begin to recognize. Loki would know what they were. That or he would start toying with them without permission. She gracefully opened her arms, gesturing to a white fur clad figure looming behind the counter.

“I present to you, Taneleer Tivan, the Collector.”
Darcy didn’t like Taneleer Tivan from the moment she realized what kind of work he was sending his employees to do with such little protection. And after seeing his ‘collection’ she knew that they were going to have problems. But he was also her only way out.

Tivan turned on his heel, allowing Darcy to get a decent look at his face. Crazed, white hair, a confident gait and wide, passive eyes.

Before greeting Darcy he looked to Dajiri. “Did you apprehend the item?”

Immediately, the girl procured the amulet from her pocket, handing it to him quickly. “Yes, sir.”

Taneleer Tivan took it, slowly turning the item over in his hands. From the top of his head he pulled down a pair of odd glasses which he used to inspect the artifact. With a small, disappointed sigh, he dropped the amulet. “It is a fake. A falsehood. I am…” he hesitated, his words clipped and well annunciacted. “Displeased.”

Dajiri seemed panicked. “I…I didn’t know, sir.’

“Only because you are a stupid girl. A dull mistake such as this demands…punishment,” he said just as plainly and impassively as he had everything else.

“Sir—“ Dajiri protested but Tivan spoke over her.

“Do not resist, girl. Go. I shall deal with you later.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand and she ducked her head, shooting Darcy a nervous glance.

As she left, Darcy was forced to bring all of her attention onto Taneleer. Oh, she wanted to say something to him, she wanted to berate his actions like she had any semblance of power in this galaxy. She didn’t. Tivan, however, had enough power to keep people in big glass containers inside his house. Darcy figured she ought to tread carefully.

“Mr. Tivan,” Darcy greeted cheerily. “Quite the collection you have here.”

He studied her with what she could assume was curiosity, for his face was so void of emotion. “Indeed. Though I believe I am at a disadvantage. You know my name, yet I do not know yours, mortal.”

“Mortal?” Darcy smiled, successfully masking the true fear pounding away in her chest. Did he have any human girls locked away in these fun cages? “What gave me away? The charming personality?”

Taneleer Tivan’s lips quirked just slightly and Darcy hoped that wasn’t a ‘I’m-internally-plotting-how-to-make-you-part-of-my-zoo-right-now’ smirk. “I have studied many species. Yours is very particular. Although you are not dressed as a mortal… “he trailed off, meeting Darcy’s eyes for a long, scary moment. “Tell me your name. You shall find that I do not like to be kept waiting.”

Darcy’s fear was momentarily pushed aside in favor of irritation. She dealt with assholes like Tivan on a daily basis. The ones who cared about themselves and treated others like dirt because they believed themselves to be more powerful. Darcy crossed her arms, Frank coiling around her shoulder threateningly. “I am Darcy. Darcy Lewis. And, if you don’t mind, Mr. Tivan, I’d like to skip the chit-chat. I’m on a bit of a tight schedule.”

Tivan considered her for a moment, perhaps with a bit of humor. He was distracted in a mere second by Frank’s black and green body. “What…an odd animal. Of what species is it? What is your price for such a pet?”
Darcy stroked her pet’s head, calming his shakes at the approach of Taneleer Tivan. Frank and Fenrir were easily scared, but they were also ferocious if need be. Frank was frightened, but he wouldn’t let any harm come to them.

“Priceless,” Darcy said conversationally, bringing Tivan from his fascinated state. “He isn’t for sale.”

Tivan raised his brows in speculation. “Isn’t he? It is not often that Dajiri drags in scum from the street in search of a deal with her employer. I only rarely allow them entrance without adding them to my collection. Bear in mind, Darcy Lewis, you have yet to leave here whole. It is odd to see a mortal so far away from their home planet. What is it you want from a collector?”

Darcy crossed her arms, throwing one hip to the side. “Transportation. I need a ship that will get me as far across the galaxy as I can get.”

Tivan offered her a gnarled, pitiful excuse for a grin and chuckled darkly. “Mortals truly are as dull as they say. I am a collector, girl. I have not what you seek. And you have nothing to trade that I desire.”

Darcy began to panic, her eyes searching the area around her for a sign, some indication that she was worth his time. She knew things about the universe, but she didn’t know how much of that she wanted Tivan to know, and there was no way to tell how she would believe her claims without a substantial amount of proof.

Tivan turned away, probably preparing some fun henchmen to come and lock her up, when her gaze landed upon a container to her left, suspended in the air by a series of thick cables. Inside rested an absolutely enormous…no, gargantuan stone sign. It was so large that Darcy had to step back to recognize that the words, were in fact, Celestian.

Impulsively, Darcy read the words aloud before stating the rough, English translation. “‘Death fears none but one, and they are not part of the Beyond.’”

Taneleer Tivan froze where he stood and a chill shot down Darcy’s spine. In a second she knew that she was going to regret her translation. “What did you just say?”

Darcy squared her shoulders, tilting her chin upwards and drowning out the wretched sounds of the imprisoned. “What do you think I said, wise one?”

Tivan advanced on her, excitement smoldering in his sick, black lined eyes. He looked sick, a man without energy, powered by nothing but his need for more things in his collection. He grabbed Darcy’s hands with a dull kind of urgency that chilled Darcy to her very core. “You speak their language? You understand it?”

Darcy swallowed hard, feeling Frank tense around her. “I can speak a lot of different languages. Right now, I’m learning how to speak yours.” She yanked her hands out of his, and taking a step back so she didn’t feel so little standing in front of him. “I need to get outside the galaxy. What can I give you in exchange for a way out?”

Tivan’s smile was a cold little thing, with no heart and wicked delight. “Your mind should suffice.”

Darcy’s eyes widened in shock as she found herself being detained. Pink hands grabbed her arms, binding her wrists behind her back with a force that just screamed ‘betrayal’. Darcy swore, her body groaning in disapproval at the rough treatment of being tossed around by people bigger than
her. “Ow! Jesus! That escalated too damn fast. I just offered to trade information for transportation. Why the fuck are you tying me to a chair?!”

Tivan pursed his lips, studying her with steepled fingers. “You offered an exchange, human. Understand that if we are going to make a bargain, it will be weighted in my favor.”

Darcy’s heart hammered in her chest and her palms were sweating like crazy, but still she kept her voice. If only Loki were there. Frank made a noise but she hushed him, giving him a stern look, telling him to keep calm. Eating Taneleer Tivan was a last resort. “Right. I got that. I still don’t get why I need to be tied up. Not unless you’re intending to back out on trading me transportation for my knowledge. That’d be a dick move.”

Tivan kept his emotionless gaze on her, his white fur coat matching his hair exactly. “Quite the contrary. I am keeping you like this for insurance.”

“Insurance?” Darcy repeated, tugging on her confines. “Handcuffs are the new Geico? No offense man, but I like the little lizard guy as a spokesperson more than I like you.”

He ignored her. “This way suits me. It ensures the truth.”

Darcy squinted at him, wishing she had her glasses. “Uh-huh.” She clicked her tongue thoughtfully for a moment. “Right. So, you presume that because you tie me up in a chair, I’m going to tell you the truth. Assuming that I even talk to you in the first place.”

“You talk too much,” Tivan said after a moment of his cold, fixated glare boring into her. “I was hoping to persuade you into speaking if you did not wish to answer my questions. Would you like to know what they are?”

Darcy swallowed hard. “You mean like a verbal explanation? Or a demonstration? Because—“ Her words were cut short by a sharp hot pain that shot through her body like a bolt of lightning.

Now, Darcy had spent a lot of long nights with Grace watching action movies where the cool badass protagonist gets tied to a chair and tortured. They sweat and groan, shaking off the pain easily enough.

Darcy wasn’t one of those guys. She screamed and swore and protested when she felt Frank go slack on her shoulder. “Frank!” she called out to her pet.

Darcy’s vision returned and she saw Dajiri holding a device similar to that of Peter Quill’s super charged taser that she had belted to her side. Except it was bigger…a lot bigger. And Darcy was sure that’s what was hurting her. Her heart burned with a sense of betrayal as Dajiri aimed the weapon at her again, refusing to make eye contact.

“How unfortunate. It isn’t tolerant to other worldly elixirs, is it?” Tivan answered her screams with a low drawl and Darcy fought uselessly against her cuffs as he picked up her unconscious serpent from the ground. He hauled Frank into a large glass container after placing an empty vial on a cluttered counter.

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“Don’t!” Darcy pleaded, tears coming to her eyes. “Jesus, you’re such an asshole. I’m the fucking protagonist of this story, so just keep in mind, that the more you hurt me, the worse this is going to be for you in the end. Capuche?”

He didn’t respond, instead choosing to walk a large circle around her, inspecting her sorry state with an air of faux pity. “I will ask you questions, Darcy Lewis. Answer them truthfully and you will have your freedom and perhaps enough units to purchase transportation. If not, then I either
kill you, or you can become part of my collection. Are we understood?"

Darcy made a sound of protest, struggling against her binds again, “I guess that all depends on the question, doesn’t it? You big, slimy, sleazy, buttnugget, knucklehead, jackass motherfu—“

Again she was struck with a full blast of the electricity and again she screamed, her eyes watering and her back arching in pure agony. When the sensation ended, her body gave an involuntary twitch, her heart beating sporadically.

“…motherfucker.” She finished weakly, meeting his eyes in a challenge.

He smirked, folding his hands behind his back as he looked down at her. “Where did you learn to speak Celestian?”

Darcy blinked sweat and tears out of her eyes, the weight of her armor painful on her skin. “My friend and I… we taught ourselves.”

Tivan motioned with his gloved hand for Dajiri to place the device against Darcy’s temple. Darcy looked to the girl pleadingly and she turned away quickly as if pained by the thought of hurting her again. Darcy wondered what was keeping her under Tivan’s employment.

“How?” he asked her calmly.

Darcy frowned, thinking back. Her memories were blurred by the passing of time, but she remembered. “A book of notes, phrases, copied from Celestian texts. None of it was translated to my native tongue.”

He narrowed his eyes and waved for Dajiri to lower the weapon. Both ladies sighed in relief. “You are a mortal.”

“Duh.”

“How did you come across such a book?”

Darcy shot a quick glance at the cage Frank inhabited, making sure he was still breathing. He seemed to be. “My best friend is a magic space prince that comes to visit me from a magic rainbow portal under my bed. His daddy has a lot of fun books.”

The pain was stronger this time and her screams were louder. When it didn’t end after a few seconds, she thought it would kill her. She believed the end was near and she shouted the only name that seemed to mean anything to her in that fit of pain. “Loki!”

Instantly, the torture ceased and Darcy gasped for air, trembling and sobbing in her chair. She looked up at Tivan with a gaze full of hate. He wasn’t even looking. “Loki…Ah. Forgive me, you were being honest. I do remember a certain ten years ago or so I recovered information regarding the Other Galaxy. Your friend is a prince. As interesting as it would be to know how a human came to befriend such a powerful being, I have other questions. Can you tell me what these are?”

He faced her, holding out what looked like a screen of sorts, but Darcy couldn’t see it from that far away.

Darcy shook her head, whimpering when the torture device touched her temple. “Wait. I-I might. I can’t see it from that far away.”

Tivan raised his brows at her and Darcy looked up at him pleadingly. “I have impaired eyesight.
Dude, your face is a blur right now. It’s a common problem amongst we mortals.”

Thankfully, Tivan complied and stepped forwards and Darcy stifled a gasp when he presented her with the galaxy equivalent of a computer generated image of what seemed to be the infinity stones. Darcy shook her head once. “I… I don’t know.”

Tivan eyed her passively for a moment before waving to Dajiri again.

Darcy braced herself for the oncoming pain, but none came.

Taneleer Tivan turned his gaze upon his slave who shifted uncomfortably in place. “Is there a problem, Dajiri?”

The girl gave Darcy a nervous glance. “She is a human.”

“Indeed,” Tivan agreed.

Dajiri turned the weapon in hand. “Too much more could kill her, Sir, and she—”

“She. What,” he interrupted, each of his quiet, dull words sharper than a knife.

The pink girl’s pretty wide eyes met hers. “She saved me. She should not die.”

Darcy suddenly felt a great deal of gratitude towards Dajiri. She was about to say ‘thank you’ when Tivan tapped his fingers together slowly. “An endearing opinion. However, it is not your decision whether she lives or dies. She is lying,” he nodded to Darcy. “Strike her again or I shall remind you of what the implications of being indebted to Taneleer Tivan truly mean.”

Dajiri looked down at Darcy with wide, fearful, apologetic eyes. “I am sorry.”

Darcy sighed in irritation. “Yeah. An apology totally makes up for all of—”

Pain should never be so painful. It hurt so bad that she cried. Death was near. It quickened her heart and tensed her muscles. It brought back memories of her childhood that she had almost forgotten about.

Loki was in her mind like a wildfire, catching onto every working cell and burning her insides with memory of him. It hurt to think, that she would never see him again and she would die because of a childhood infatuation with magic space rocks.

But before she could scream away the last remnants of her life, the torture ended and she saw something.

Just over Taneleer Tivan’s shoulder, behind Frank’s cage, she saw one of his many boxes and inside of it was a galaxy.

Blackness imbedded with moving shine and elegant curves bent and thrashed inside, banging at the glass walls, the sound drowning out the last echoes of Darcy’s screams. It wasn’t until the great head of this creature turned to her, face full of worry, that she recognized her.

Darcy chuckled feebly, her vision blurring in and out. “Astrid,” she whispered, almost intelligibly to herself. “The Pride of Muspelheim, subject to the collector… a true disgrace.”

Tivan grabbed her face, tilting her head so that she was forced to look at him. “You recognize that one as well?”
Darcy tried to gather enough saliva in her mouth to spit on him, but her tongue felt too weak to even do that. A salty mixture of blood and saliva dribbled from her lips as she answered him saucily. She only got one chance to die, and she wasn’t going down like a weenie. She was Darcy fucking Lewis. “I’ll never talk. Have fun being clueless, Tivan. Once I’m dead…you’ll get curioser and curioser.”

The Collector removed a white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the blood from her chin tenderly. “You are mistaken, Darcy Lewis. There are ways to make the dead talk. Your mind is not useless to me once your heart has stopped beating. Although it will be disappointing if there isn’t everything I want inside your head. That being said, Darcy Lewis, tell me…” He began gently pushing sweaty strands of hair off her face. “…where can I find your prince?”

Darcy grit her teeth resolutely. Now she was in a fix. The purpose of her death was to keep Loki and the universe safe. But if Taneleer Tivan could pry her thoughts straight from her cold, dead lips, dying wouldn’t save anything. But what more could she do?

“You can’t,” Darcy told him, tears leaking from her eyes. “You won’t. Not on my life. I swear it.”

“Your life…” Taneleer Tivan mocked in quiet humor. “How quaint. I will enjoy adding your knowledge to my collection, Darcy Lewis.”

Darcy tried with all her might for one final hurrah, to yank her way free of her cuffs and escape. But it was no use. Her limbs were too limp and they refused to accept the power of her will. Finally, she gave in, prepared to die a failure. The universe and Loki would be subject to the cruel hand of the Collector. Her parents would never know where she’d gone and Culver would go on without her.

And Loki would be lonely. He would miss her. The last thing she wanted to do was leave him alone without her company and without her love. He would be in pain. She knew he would be, because if he were to die, she would never cease to mourn him.

He would never know that she was in love with him.

Before, with the uncertainties between them, the pressuring societal expectations on Asgard and even the insecurity she felt towards her mortality at times, she had not been able to admit it, even to herself. But now, on the brink of death, she had nothing to lose in giving in to sweet, unexplainable sentiment.

She was going to leave him, and she was powerless to stop her departure.

Tears streaked down her face and she sat back in her chair, watching the blurs of glass cages spin. “I’m sorry, Loki,” she sobbed, waiting for the hot, white agony of her death. “I love you.”

She heard Dajiri move and flinched, expecting her blow.

But it never came.

Instead she heard the fleshy sound of metal against flesh and she opened her eyes to see Dajiri standing over the unconscious body of Taneleer Tivan. She was shaking, but she hurried to Darcy’s side nonetheless, freeing her of her confines.

“Darcy, I’m so sorry. I will never earn your forgiveness,” she said, catching her weak mortal form as she fell from the stiff backed chair.

“Well,” Darcy said faintly. “I wouldn’t say that.”
Dajiri quickly led them to one of the many work desks, rifling through the drawers in earnest. “We will find you enough units to purchase a ship and you will find your friend.” She paused to look at Darcy, cheeks damp with tears. “I… I wish I still had someone I loved so much.”

“Believe me when I say,” Darcy said, working up enough strength to stand properly. “It’s not as great as it sounds.” Finally she stood, stumbling to Frank’s cage. It was low enough to the ground that she could reach in and touch him, but she didn’t have enough energy to lift him. “How do I wake him up?”

Dajiri hurried to her side with a small contraption. She held it over him, silver mist dusting over his scaly body. Slowly, he perked up, head thrashing back and forth wildly before his gaze fell upon Darcy. He slithered around her body, licking the salty tears and sweat from her face. “We’re okay, Frank. We’re okay.”

Dajiri smiled meekly. “Come. I will get you those units.”

She went back to the desks, jumping when a loud ‘bang’ sounded through the room.

Darcy turned her attention to Astrid’s cage, tripping over her feet to get there. Frank made excited sounds and the majestic beast within growled and clawed at the glass, trying to reach her. “Dajiri. I need her.”

The pink girl timidly hurried to Darcy’s side as she was in danger of collapse. “I have never seen it…her…act so enthusiastically before. Ever since Taneleer found her, she only ever sleeps, hardly eating even. It was sad.”

Darcy touched the glass. “Free her, please. She can help me find Loki faster than any ship or map.”

Dajiri hesitated for a moment before pressing all five of her fingertips to a metallic panel on the side of the case, followed by typing in a long number code and a voice recognition code. “I am not supposed to have access to any of the cages, but I reconfigured them one day… while Taneleer was asleep.”

With a final pull of a lever, the front panel of the cage fell away, crashing onto the ground and shattering into a million fractals. From the depths stepped Darcy’s beloved galaxy dragon. And gods had she grown.

The smallish creature, fresh born and alone that had flown her and Loki from Muspelheim was no longer a mere babe. She towered over Darcy, her black eyes alight with warm recognition and body poised with the glorious liberation of a goddess, free from her ties. She reared her head and shot to the skies a blazing hot stream of white fire that shined as bright as the stars Darcy would live to see again.

The metal ceiling melted under the heat of her breath and the glass on the ground turned back to its natural sandy element under the force of her stance.

Astrid, in all her magnificence, bent down for Darcy to mount her back. With Dajiri’s help, she managed to cling to her precious friend’s back, Frank making excited sounds at her side.

“Will you be alright?” Darcy asked the girl, worry clinching her chest.

Dajiri shook her head with a sad smile. “I will suffer the consequences. But do not be disheartened, Darcy Lewis. Even in one of these cages, I will be freer than I have been in a very long time. Go. Find your friend. He is lucky to have you.”
Darcy nodded. “I will.”

With these as her final parting words, Astrid spread her great black wings that glistened like the light of the stars, breaking several of Taneleer Tivan’s cages in the process, and took wondrous flight.

Darcy clung on for dear life, a solitary thought on her mind: She was going to find Loki, and when she did, she was going to tie him to her bed (platonically) and he wouldn’t be allowed to leave.

And they were never going after another infinity stone ever again.

***

Gamora walked in even stance behind Nebula as they boarded their ship. Thanos, her ‘father’, had informed them that there had been a definite shift in the universe and the state of the galaxy. He told them, that an ancient power had been stirred and that he needed them to find its carrier.

He spoke vaguely and Gamora was unsure of his intentions. However, she did know this; if Thanos wanted something as badly as he seemed to want this, she must do everything in her power to keep it out of his hands.

She had asked him to be in charge of the mission, he chuckled, reminding her that she was his favorite daughter, but she was still not ready.

Nebula would lead them in their expedition. They were to go out in search of all Ravager ships, for thieves were always the first to check for lost and valuable items.

Gamora accepted this without question, arming herself for battle. Whatever power awaited, she would steal it and hide it far away where none would ever see it again.

She would do anything to spite Thanos and stop his wrongdoings.

***

Loki watched as Peter Quill flew them through space, magically reaching out in all directions in search of Darcy.

Blissful silence had overtaken the ship as they traveled through a passage that included a lot of small moon-like planets, each one large enough for a few large ships to land on. Peter Quill navigated through them, leaving Loki to think through everything that had happened.

If there was one thing he gathered from his experience, it was that he must find all of the infinity stones. He must. They were too dangerous, too powerful to be unguarded. Perhaps this was his mother’s intention, for him to protect the universe from the power of the stones.

He figured it was well enough protected in the dimensional pocket he’d tucked it away in. Peter Quill mustn’t know about its existence. He was a thief and the stone was powerful and priceless.

Loki would have liked to believe that he was a protector, a guard for the universe’s most potent entities. But he knew that the truth was much graver and much more unsatisfying. The Celestian prophecy kept replaying in his head, over and over. Its last words, that final breath of dusty air had told him that he was a shadow. Shadows were not heroes. They did not rescue galaxies and they did not have their names written in the history books.

Loki clenched his fists. He need not be a hero. He did not need power and glory. He only wanted
Darcy back. That would be enough.

“Hey, Loki, can you give me a bit more instruction on where the hell we’re going? I wanna help you man, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve got fun outlaw things to do and you and your girlfriend kinda hijacked my ship,” Peter Quill said over his shoulder, pausing a moment to consider his situation. “Shit, I have Stockholm Syndrome don’t I?”

Loki rolled his eyes, sitting beside Quill in the co-pilot’s chair. “Perhaps. I would not consider it too deeply. As soon as I have found Darcy, we shall find our own means to exit the galaxy.”

Quill nodded. “Sounds fair. So where am I going again? I think we should start…” he trailed off distractedly as he caught sight of a green skinned woman in black leather body armor standing beside a ship. From a distance, she appeared to be checking her pockets, but upon further inspection, Loki saw that she was doing a count of her weapons.

She looked up at Peter Quill’s ship, waving hopefully. The way she stood, with her hip against her ship and an internal strap of her armor hanging off one shoulder, she appeared quite alluring. Loki immediately did not trust her.

“Quill—“

“We should help her.”

“Quill, I need to find Darcy.”

“Why? So you can yell at each other some more and not get laid? Hey man, I’ve had a rough afternoon. One of us has got to get it today.” Peter Quill defended his case, promptly angling the ship downwards and landing beside the woman’s ship.

Loki sighed in defeat, readying his daggers, just in case. Upon landing, Quill quickly got up from his chair, running a hand through his hair and cracking his knuckles before pressing a few buttons on the console to open the side of his ship.

Loki watched in good-natured humor at the valiant, dumb Star-Lord who had no sooner opened the door of his ship than a slim, black leather boot hit him in the head. Quill landed face-down on the ground and the green woman stepped over him curiously, pulling up the strap on her shoulder, righting her armor.

“He’s a human,” Loki explained for his fallen companion, leaning against a paneled wall, Fenrir posed defensively at his side. “They are easily broken.”

The woman smirked and Loki acknowledged that the weapons she had been checking earlier were no more than a single knife. It was then, in her presence, watching her move stealthily towards him, slinking like a ferocious Midgardian jungle cat, that he realized she had no need for guns and knives. She was a weapon, body, mind, and all.

In response to this acknowledgement, Loki dropped his daggers, letting them magically dissipate before clattering to the ground.

The woman watched, her stance shifting from that of a primal predator to someone with the will to negotiate. “I have no reason to fight you, if you give me what I need.”

Loki raised his brows, splaying his hands in an open gesture. “Name it, milady. You have already incapacitated the outlaw, what could you ask of his traveling companion?”
She narrowed her eyes skeptically, taking long, measured strides around the ship’s cockpit. “I am in search of something ancient and powerful, something a ravager would kill to get his hands on.”

Suddenly, a knife was at his throat and his body ached to retaliate with a threat of his own. Loki never truly craved a fight, but he was Asgardian and after half of a year of training with Thor, he wanted to exercise his ability in combat. He must take care of this woman before he could return to finding Darcy.

The woman’s lips were at his ear as the blade bit the skin of his neck. “Tell me if you’ve seen anything, or I’ll kill you where you stand. Your death is of no consequence to me.”

Loki chuckled darkly, deciding that he wasn’t going to use magic, at least not for a while. He was going to have fun first. “I know.”

Her arm tensed, prepared to slit his throat, but Loki ducked out of her grasp just in time, twisting her wrist so she dropped the knife. She righted her stance immediately, her eyes raking over Loki, analyzing his next move.

When he didn’t, she lashed out, aiming a blow at his face, but Loki dodged it just in time. She tried again with her other fist and he dodged it as well as they walked circles around one another, anticipating the other’s speed and methods of attacking.

And then they were battling. She kicked at his knees and he deflected her attacks, in awe of her speed. Fighting with Thor, as he normally did, required that he be the quick one, the one to duck under heavy-armed blows and strong hammer attacks.

He could tell in fighting this woman that she was also accustomed to this kind of style as her offensive movements were more hesitant. It was only when Loki lashed out, twisting her arm in order to keep her elbow out of his nose, and she successfully managed to bash her head against his, sending him out of Peter Quill’s ship onto the dirt outside.

He rubbed his head appreciatively, thinking that this woman hit almost as hard as Thor. In the next second, he was standing up, ducking under the fierce swing of her knife.

They fought like Loki had never fought before. She was after the power stone and Loki, possessor of the artifact, could not let her have it. She was deadly, an assassin, and she was targeting ravager ships, killing their pilots to find it. Loki knew there were more people like her, powerful individuals who knew of the infinity stones, and he could not let them take forces they could never hope to control. It was dangerous.

In defense of the universe, Loki decided the woman must die. While he enjoyed their small battle as a sport, he was reluctant for it to become anything more. But, even though he did not like the idea of killing her, he found, as he had on Jotunheim in violently murdering Thrymr, that her death would not weigh on his conscious; it was of no consequence to him.

So, he fought to kill, shifting his tactic from defensive to offensive. He conjured her daggers and took the woman’s moment of shock to take a jab at her neck. She diverted his endeavor and their fight went on.

Loki didn’t tire and every strike she managed to land on him did little to slow him down and the same went for her. Their styles were so similar and their stamina so well matched that Loki wondered if there would ever be an end.

“This is an odd day for me,” Loki commented as she narrowly escaped the sly attack of one of his
blades, a strand of her pink hair sweeping across his face.

“Is it?” she asked, landing a kick in the center of his chest. Instead of stumbling, he wrapped a hand around her ankle, twisting it in a way that should have shattered every bone in her foot. But her body moved with his efforts as she brought her other boot up to smack him in the face.

“Yes,” he answered, flicking a dagger past her ear as a distraction before attempting to shove another between her ribs. He failed and found himself having to knock a blade away from his jugular. “On any other day, you would already be dead.”

“On any other day,” the woman said, the back of her hand lashing out to slap him across the face, “so would you.”

He brought his heel down on the arch of her foot and in return she broke his nose, quickly and most indelicately kneeling his manhood. He groaned, eyes watering. “Well aimed.”

“Practice,” she said, almost pleasantly, slapping him across the other cheek just as his vision has begun to return.

“I never would have guessed,” Loki returned quick enough, countering her abuse with a blunt blow to her side. “I am Loki, by the way.”

Her lips curled back over her teeth as she bit back a yelp of pain. “Gamora,” she panted as he took her into a headlock. “I am sorry to have met you like this.”

“I somehow find that hard to believe,” he told her thoughtfully as she bit down on his palm hard enough to draw blood. He conjured another dagger, bringing it to her throat, ignoring her teeth on his skin. Somewhere outside their fight, Loki thought he saw the descent of a dark ship onto their moon. Or perhaps it was just a shadow.

Gamora made a near beastly growl that Loki found incredibly attractive. “You are a skilled opponent. Killing you is a victory I will remember.”

“Likewise,” he said smartly, but before he could slit her throat as he intended, she threw him over her shoulder as if he weighed nothing to lie on his back at her feet, his dagger in her hand, poised delicately over his head.

“You are not human,” Gamora commented after stomping her foot on his hand and no audible cracks issued from the bones there.

In his other hand, he procured a dagger, quickly bringing it forth to stab her in the calf. She issued another snarl, holding her stance. Loki smirked, “Neither are you.”

Gamora drew the dagger over her head and Loki tensed his muscles to move at the last moment. But before she could bring the knife down to the dirt, a muted thud, the sound of metal hitting flesh, sounded across the barren moon’s plane, and Gamora’s eye’s rolled back in her head as she fell to the ground, unconscious.

“I am. I’m mortal, in case anyone was wondering. I don’t think anyone was, but just in case they were…here I am.”

Loki was on his feet in an instant, taking Darcy in his arms and hugging her fiercely. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent like he would never have the opportunity ever again. He was suffocating and she was oxygen. Not far away, Jörmungandr and Fenrir were wrapped around one
another in an embrace, unique to their friendship, clearly happy to see one another again.

Loki began to apologize the moment he felt he had enough air to project words. “Darcy, I am sorry. I am so sorry. It is all my fault. I was being a fool. I am a fool. I promise I will never put you in such danger ever again, I will magically bind us together next time. I love you, I thought you were gone. Gods, Darcy, I—”

“Loki…” she slurred, her arms weakly pushing him away. “Ow…”

He promptly released her, worry clenching at his chest as he magically inspected her body. She was internally wounded, grave injury marking the inside of her body. “Darcy…Darcy, what happened to you?” he gasped, sinking to his knees as she went limp in his arms. There was dried blood on her cheek and there was bruising on the side of her neck. Other than that, there appeared to be no visible damage.

“Guy with a super taser…wanted my brain for science,” she mumbled, blinking up at him with her wide, watery eyes. “Hey Lokes…”

He was quickly making magical preparations on her body so that her mortal form would not be harmed by the amount of magic it would take to heal her completely. “Hush, Darling. All will be well.”

“I know,” she smiled, touching his face. “I love you too. You’re such a pain in the ass.”

He chuckled shakily, projecting as much of his magic onto her as he dared. “Are those sentiments mutually exclusive?”

She laughed quietly, stopping only to scowl when the pain became too great. “I wish they were. It would make loving you a whole lot easier.”

He quirked a grin, heart swelling at her declaration of love. Of course, he knew she did not mean that she was in love with him. At least he did not think that is what she meant. He was not dull enough to think he had any chance of earning those feelings from Darcy, especially after their fight and all that had happened that day. Still, it made him happy and he sighed in mock exasperation, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “So says the mortal.”

Her smile was brighter than any sun he had yet to come across. The only thing that could have outshined it was his relief when he felt her body beginning to accept his magic and heal. Tenderly, he cradled her to his chest, marveling in the warm sensation that rolled through his chest at having her near. It made his throat thick and placated the rapid thrum of his heart. She was safe; he was home.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Darcy buried her face in his neck. He stroked her hair, keeping a close eye on Gamora. If she woke now, he would find a way to strike her down with magic. Darcy was here and she was hurt. He must protect her.

“Darcy,” he said her name softly, as if the volume of his words could worsen her wounds. “Who did this to you?”

She only shook her head and hot tears wet his neck. In a broken voice she recited to him the terrific story of her journey in the middle of Knowhere.

“Darcy…” Loki nearly growled her name, swallowing his immediate desire to wet his hands with the blood of Taneleer Tivan. He would get his opportunity…one day. Repressing his pressing need to reek havoc on The Collector’s life, Loki looked to Astrid.
He often wondered what had become of her, if she flew around from realm to realm, drinking moonlight and bathing in stardust. If he had known she was a captive, caged by a torturer, he would have come to her rescue. They would have to keep a closer eye on her from here on out. “Astrid has grown.”

“Loki,” Darcy murmured quietly, pulling away to focus on his face. “We can’t go after Infinity Stones anymore. It’s too dangerous. People know about them. I don’t know how many, but they’re willing to kill to get their hands on them, Loki.”

His jaw clenched at the thought of someone threatening Darcy’s life for information. He addressed her, glancing to Gamora’s limp form. “I know.”

She shifted from his lap, moving to kneel before him, her warm hands holding his face. “It’s not safe, Loki. Look at you…” she took the hand Gamora had bit, her fingers tracing over the drying blood and nearly healed wound.

It was at that moment that Loki realized three fundamental truths at the exact same time.

Firstly, Darcy was right. She usually was. But in this case, it was essential that he face the truth of her words: The Infinity Stones were dangerous.

Not only were they hazardous to hold, but even to possess knowledge of them was unsafe. The mention of them sent attractive green assassins and mortal torturers.

Secondly, Darcy was mortal and he was not. He had always known this, but it hurt to remember every time. Her mortality was often a joke to them. They both understood that she was strong, stronger than anyone would ever give her credit for. But he must also acknowledge that her mortality was a very real thing. She was breakable, small, and so very precious. Her lifeline was limited, a segment of the infinite expanse it could be.

She was weak. Expediting after the infinity stones could kill her. It almost had. Loki, as an Asgardian, could hold his own. He had magic to fight, to heal, to hide things…Darcy was near defenseless.

Thirdly, the infinity stones must be found. And they could not be found by just anyone; it must be him.

The Celestian had been clear enough, and although Loki did not understand the entirety of its prophecy, he knew he would find out in the future. For now, he must locate the stones at the very least. He must do it, for the safety of the universe.

It was for these reasons that Loki knew he could not have what he wanted.

And he knew what he wanted now.

He wanted Darcy Lewis. He wanted her to be in love with him as he was in love with her. He wanted to hold her and kiss her as her lover as well as her friend. He wanted to be as close as he could to her without their cells melting together. The only air he wanted to breathe was that which had passed through her lips.

But she mustn’t know of his feelings.

He would take them back to Midgard and Darcy would go on her date with the Idiot Boy, Johnny Storm. Loki would remove himself from her bed for the first time in forever because he knew now that he had admitted the truth of his love for her to himself, it would be far too tempting to do so
while they were together in their element.

They would revert to a more conventional friendship. He would spend more time alone, focusing on infinity stones, and Darcy could enjoy being a Midgardian with a mortal boyfriend. It was better this way. She would be safe this way. He would cease spreading rumors about his romantic escapades. He had no need to make Darcy jealous anymore, not that he truly had a good reason to begin with.

He stared into her eyes, deep in thought, mesmerized by their gorgeous depths. Those eyes were a reflection of the heart of Darcy Lewis: fierce, beautiful, and far too stubborn for her own good.

His experience with the Celestian and the power stone would not go over well with her, especially with his intended escapades in mind. He made up his mind not to tell her. At least not until he had found all of them.

Darcy’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Did you find it? The gem?”

He gave a curt nod, opening his inter-dimensional pocket and pulling from it the metallic sphere. With her eyes trained on his, he let his fingers trail over the surface, sliding the circular panels apart to reveal the purple orb, which he lifted in his hand to show her.

“Loki,” she gasped in amazement, “you can control it.”

“Well, control is a strong word,” he reasoned, putting it back inside its container.

“‘Get-along-with’ might be a better term.”

Her lips twitched tiredly and she squinted at the sky, reminding him that he had her glasses. With a wave of his hand, they were repaired and sitting on the bridge of her nose, like they’d never been lost.

“Loki, we have to find somewhere to put it. Please don’t keep it with you. Please don’t take it back to Asgard. I know you’re a bit banana balls, but you’re not a complete crazy cake.”

Loki wanted to deny her, or lie to her, but he couldn’t. She sounded so very ‘Darcy’, yet so sad, broken…desperate.

He nodded, holding out his smallest finger. “I will take care of it. I promise.”

Sniffling a bit, she linked their pinkies.

They stood, stepping into one another’s embrace. Loki would have stayed in the safety of her arms forever were it not for the loud blare of music that sounded from Peter Quill’s ship.

'Hail (hail)

What’s the matter with your hair? Yeah

Hail (hail)

What’s the matter with your mind and your sign? And a, oh, oh, oh-a

Hail (hail)

Nothing the matter with your head baby, find it, come on and find it
Hail

With it, baby, 'cause you're fine, and you're mine, and you look so divine

Come and get your love
Come and get your love
Come and get your love
Come and get your love'

Loki shook his head tiredly at Peter Quill’s ship as its ridiculous pilot whistled out the window. “You got this man! You got this!”

Darcy rolled her eyes, mumbling under her breath, “Way to ruin the moment, Star-Lord.”

Fenrir and Jörmungandr, who had been having a reunion of their own with Astrid, whined at his musical farewell. Loki hated to believe they would truly miss Peter Quill, but they would.

Darcy’s hand slipped into his and she gave his fingers a light squeeze, “Come on, Lokes. Let’s go home and drop off that rock somewhere.”

Together, they climbed upon Astrid’s back, Loki taking one last glance back at the unconscious Gamora. He would have felt bad, had they not been trying to kill each other earlier.

The Galaxy Dragon flew fast, but Loki managed, as they were passing a planet with many geysers, to magically place the stone within it. He had no doubt that people would find it, but he trusted the Celestial’s design of the orb’s container to keep unwanted users out. He would return for it.

Loki could feel the moment they passed through the space between the Galaxy Beyond and Yggdrasil and he released a breath of relief when they entered the Asgardian atmosphere.

Astrid landed in the field outside the passage to Midgard and Loki scratched her scales affectionately. She nuzzled his hair once before taking off again, her great black wings blending in with the night sky perfectly.

Back in Darcy’s room, he bid his beloved mortal farewell, shortening the length of their embrace and wishing her well on her date. She deserved it.

He would not return to sleep with her that night, or the night after. She would be at peace without him and he would watch the stars, trying with all his might to decipher their gripe with him; they must have in their cores an unfathomable hate for his very existence to subject his heart to such a fate.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! We made it to the end...
*cough*...end of the line... *cough*

I would just like to give a shout out to Caz. Do you know what this lady does before each of my updates? She reads through them and fixes my grammar and spelling errors
and let me just tell you, I am a fucking disaster without that proofreading. Imagine reading trash. Now imagine reading trash with comma splices. That is the difference between reading my fic as it is now and reading my fic without Caz editing it. Three cheers for her!

Alright, now...notes on shit.
I fully intend to use the plot of both of the Thor movies made as of December 2015. This fic will continue on through those movies and the Avengers. I am adding a considerable amount of plot elements as you may have already guessed. Honestly, I'm really happy that the story is starting to pick up the pace a bit.

I shamelessly used Hamilton quotes at the end. I couldn't throw away my shot. I had to. I'm Non-Stop with the Hamilton. I swear, one day I will be in the room where it happens. I have more if you're willing to wait for it... Lol, okay. I'm done now. Jk, one last time. Okay, now I'm satisfied.
Uhhh, right. So! Johnny Storm comes up next chapter! For those of you who thought tasertricks was going to become a thing this chapter...I'm sorry. Like...we'll get there. Two more chapters I think. It'll be great, I promise.

Just as a note, all of this happens before Guardians of the Galaxy. I have a deleted bit with Groot and Rocket, but it really didn't fit with the story and it added a good 5k words onto this chapter that didn't need to be there.

Alright, I know there's more I wanted to say. I'll think of it eventually. For now, I just want to thank all of you for reading! You're all beautiful little potatoes and I love you as if you were my own taters. :)}
Frank's Winter

Chapter Summary

Sigyn's apprenticeship. #Baldur. Loki is depressed. Darcy has a boyfriend. Odin...man, what a dick.

Chapter Notes

Hi. I just want to put a small trigger warning on here for self-destructive behavior/depression. It isn't that bad, but there is a little bit. I know that some people can be more sensitive to it than others.

Also, I am so very, very, very, very sorry for the delay on this update. I didn't write anything the month of December because my family was visiting and I had no alone time to dwell upon the woes of otp. So, thank you all very much for waiting up on me!

I love you all!
Q

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Baldur sat by his hammer and anvil, polishing two short swords and admiring the craftsmanship. The blade was magically created; Baldur had seen it many times, but never quite this beautifully done. The blades were small and thin, but well balanced and flexible. The pummels were ornate, but simplistically so. It was clear by their size and weight that the swords were not meant for someone especially large or particularly strong.

The size of the grips would suggest the wielder was either a child or a small lady.

Even if Advisor Darcy had not been the one to give him her swords for a ‘tune-up’, as she called it, he would have known they were hers if for no other reason than the tiny letters ‘D’ and ‘L’ shaped on either of the swords. He assumed that the ‘L’ was for her Prince.

Baldur would admit that he’d been doing a great deal of thinking about Prince Loki’s Advisor as of late.

He thought back to the first time he met her. She had been a tiny little girl with a walk that told him she was far too excitable for the complacent life of a lady. She’d brought him a picture she drew of a dagger she needed made for her friend’s, Prince Loki’s, birthday present.

He remembered her. Not only because her sketch was so well done, but because she identified herself as a friend of Prince Loki’s. She didn’t say so in a boastful or gloating way. It was a fact. She was his friend. And Baldur had been involved enough in the lives of Asgardian royalty to know that, in the past, Loki hadn’t many friends.

As time went on, Lady Darcy became Advisor Darcy and rumors began to spread of her and Loki.
Baldur was old and busy. He didn’t have enough time to keep up with the latest gossip. But any fool could see they cared about one another.

Take for instance the topic of Baldur’s interest involving a golden arrow.

The incident on Skornheim with the near assassination of Prince Loki had sent Darcy to him with a golden arrow Baldur hadn’t seen for years. When she approached him, it was to find the maker of the arrow and its purpose.

Of course Baldur told her the truth. He made the arrow long before the war. Originally, it had been part of a set of twelve arrows and a bow. His intent had been to craft armor as well, a golden suit of Valkyrie hide for a woman worthy enough to bear its glory. Of course, the woman he had in mind perished and he canceled his project soon after. His sketches for the armor were lost over the years, the arrows scattered during the war. All he had left was the bow.

Baldur pressed his cloth into his fine-made polishing elixir, oiling the blade once more before Advisor Darcy returned to retrieve it. He had plenty of things to be doing. With the impending battle with Vanaheim, Lords and Nobles wanted new armor for themselves and their son’s needed new blades. Being the royal blacksmith, Baldur was the best Asgard had to offer. He was always taking orders, crafting new weapons for this person or that.

It was getting boring. He used to think that by this time in his life he might have grandchildren to take as apprentices or that he might find something he enjoyed more than being a smith. Thus far, neither had happened and he got the feeling that neither ever would.

Once the swords were done, he returned them to their respective sheaths and made his way to his shop where customers and clients typically entered. Unlike shopkeepers and merchants, Baldur didn’t have any staff. Anyone who wanted work done either knew where to find him when he wasn’t at his shop or left a letter on the counter on what they wanted done.

Not a soul went down to his work area save him and his apprentice if he ever got around to having one.

No sooner had he made his way to the front desk to check for orders than one of the double-doors to his shop swung open and a short, brown haired lady scurried inside. Snow clung in her hair as she fought against the wind to get the door shut, muttering to herself in the process.

“…damn door…stupid Loki…stupid Odin…stupid Thor…fucking royals and their fucking… needs…” Advisor Darcy grunted as she shifted positions to push the door shut rather than pull it. Baldur continued to watch her for a moment, thoroughly entertained. She hadn’t even seen him there and he didn’t have the heart to tell her that the door had locked open and there was a lever atop the entry way that would allow her to close it properly. In all honesty, he did not think she was tall enough to reach it.

After another moment, she ceased her efforts huffing at the door. “Alright, listen here you stationary piece of shit, I’ve had a rough day, it’s cold outside, and I have no upper body strength. So close now before I get my swords back and go all Inigo Montoya on your ass. ‘I am Advisor Fucking Darcy, you refused to shut, prepare to die!’” she threatened before pushing again with all her might.

Baldur sighed to keep himself from laughing. He wondered if he’d ever had grandkids if they would be like Darcy. Easily, he walked to the door through the wind and snow blowing inside, and flipped the lever. Instantly, the door slammed shut and Advisor Darcy tumbled forwards, falling face first to the ground.
Baldur couldn’t stop the laughter now and several hearty chuckles rumbled in his chest. What a cute kid. She may be nearing the end of her adolescent years, but she was still a cute kid. She’d still be a cute kid by the time she’s got a few extra thousand years on her.

Advisor Darcy hopped to her feet, her cheeks bright red and her fur cloak hanging off one shoulder. “Baldur, hi. I…uh…didn’t see you there. Did you…um…” she swallowed nervously, “…hear all that?”

He shook his head, rubbing his hands together to bring some heat back into his chilled palms. This may have been the coldest winter on Asgard yet, “Hear what? Aren’t you here to pick up your swords?”

Smiling, she straightened her cloak. “My swords. How are they?”

Baldur walked her to the counter, picking up one of the swords. “They’re in good shape. I sharpened them, oiled the blades a little. Can’t say I found anything the matter unless you were looking to buy new.”

She shook her head, flecks of melted snow going any which way. “Nah. I like these.” He held them out to her and she belted them around her waist, “Thanks, Baldur. How much do I owe you again?”

Baldur waved her off. “Nothing.”

“Baldur…”

He scowled, clapping her on the shoulder perhaps a bit too hard, for she nearly fell over. “Hey kid, listen, I’ve got all the Lords from this place and that wanting new armor. I’ve got enough money to buy High Lord Beard-Ass right out of Nornheim’s army. I don’t need your coins just for checking up on your swords.”

His words made her laugh and Baldur imagined that any granddaughter of his would appreciate rude humor. Ladies nowadays were too tame. They’re all too young to be so confined. They should all laugh more.

“All right, Baldur. If you insist.” Darcy said warmly and for the first time, the blacksmith noticed the dark circles under her eyes. He couldn’t recall seeing the little lady this tired. Perhaps it was the cold. Few young people slept well in the cold these days. Their skin was too thin.

Baldur cleared his throat as she turned to leave. “Advisor Darcy, perhaps there is something you could give me as payment.”

She smiled at him, palms up. “Lay it on me.”

Smirking at her strange phrasing, he went behind his desk, shuffling through the small drawers till he found a sealed envelope he’d been meaning to send to Queen Frigga for a while now. He handed it to Darcy, “I need an apprentice. Frigga knows I’m particular about who I teach. Give her that and tell her I trust her judgment. I didn’t like the last few idiots the Allfather sent my way.”

The lady nodded approvingly, stowing the note in her belt. “What happened to the other guys?”

Baldur shrugged. “Smithing is a dangerous line of work. There are bound to be a few casualties.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes at him skeptically and the smith laughed. “Oh, fine. I told ‘em to scram after they asked how much I made per century. Load of noble shits with nothing on their minds but gold and tits and blood.” He cleared his throat, remembering that he was speaking to a lady.
“Pardon my language.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you Baldur.” This seemed to satisfy her as she patted the letter on her hip. “I’ll get this to Queen Frigga as soon as possible. I’m seeing her later today.”

Baldur nodded to her. “Right then, Advisor Darcy. Keep warm. And tell that prince of yours he did a fine job on the swords. Not many sorcerers can charm as well as I can craft.”

The fall of her cheerful expression was drastic and she was doing a terrible job at hiding how very upset she seemed by what he said.

Darcy pulled her cloak tighter around her, “Yeah…okay. I’ll tell him. Loki…he’ll be glad to hear it.”

Baldur frowned, opening the door and closing it for her as she stepped into the cold, cold day. Idly, he wondered what was going on with the two of them and if she knew who his apprentice was going to be.

***

“Pass the remote.”

“No fucking way.”

“Pass the remote, please?”

“Nope.” Darcy said, holding the TV remote closer to her chest and away from the greedy paws of her evening vegging partner.

Johnny narrowed his eyes, making a grab for the controller.

Johnny Storm was Darcy’s boyfriend.

They will have been together almost four months come March and she didn’t even know when they became official.

Maybe it was on their first date, a week following her galactic excursion, when he took her to the natural history museum because he thought she would like it better than a basketball game. Or maybe their second date when he snuck them into the movie theatre so they could laugh at a ridiculously fake thriller movie.

Maybe it was when he kissed her after they got chased out and they ran four blocks to get away.

Maybe it was when she kissed him back.

However it happened and however long ago, the current result was the two of them sitting on his couch with Chinese takeout, catching up on the best modern media had to offer.

“Darcy, you’re a hoarder with bad taste in television.” Johnny grunted, trying, and failing, to pry the TV remote from her hands.

“No true!” she protested, her voice muffled by a pillow that fell into her face as she put her socked feet on Johnny’s chest in attempt to push him off. “You’re the one with bad taste!”

“We’ve been watching South Park and Spongebob since three!” he argued, batting away the cushion she’d thrown at him.
“Since three?” Darcy asked, stopping her struggle abruptly and shoving the remote under her butt where Johnny Storm would never find it. “What time is it?”

Sighing, he checked his watch. “Nine.”

“Nine?” Darcy stood up, abandoning the remote to a cruel life without the underwater joys of Spongebob Squarepants. “Shit, I’ve gotta go.”

In a second, Johnny’s hands were on her hips pulling her into his lap, catching her lips in his for a heated few seconds that made Darcy very much want to stay.

There were things about Johnny Storm that Darcy just couldn’t help but like.

First of all, he teased her, but not in a particularly annoying way like some unearthly individuals chose to. He fought her for the television remote, but he didn’t tickle her till she couldn’t breathe. They argued over whether or not to get olives on their pizza, and usually they could settle for half with and half without since, being a mortal, he couldn’t easily eat the whole damn thing by himself.

Secondly, he was really fucking hot. Usually, Darcy would say she wasn’t that into blondes, but being that the only people she’d ever kissed in her life were all blonde, she should probably stop saying it. So what if he didn’t have black hair? Darcy couldn’t even think of anyone with black hair that she even thought was attractive. Not one person on this planet…

Thirdly, he wasn’t extremely affectionate with her. They held hands in public and made out in the locker room during Darcy’s free period, he sat with her and Grace at lunch and he had a thing for grabbing her ass whenever he could. She couldn’t blame him; her ass was on point. But Johnny never held her. Darcy realized when they first started dating that he just wasn’t the kind of person to cuddle casually.

The second week of their relationship, she hugged him, only to receive a weak, one armed squeeze in return.

It wasn’t because he didn’t care about her or he didn’t like her, he just wasn’t very snuggly.

And Darcy was just fine with that. It’s not like she needed them or anything.

Besides, she didn’t even know if she wanted Johnny to cuddle with her. For a few dumb reasons that may or may not have to do with cuddle-bug space princes.

It was these reasons that led Darcy to deepen their kiss, flicking her tongue against his and pressing her thighs together when he squeezed her hip. Another minute later, she broke the kiss, thoroughly enjoying how Johnny Storm looked with flushed cheeks and messy hair. “Are you sure you have to go? Because I just remembered how much I really fucking love Spongebob.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, smirking at her boyfriend as she stood up from his lap. “Well, don’t let me come between you and Spongebob.”

“I was actually thinking you could come between me and my bed sheets, but Spongebob works too if you’re up for it.” Johnny said with a playful grin, turning off the TV and standing up to walk her to the door.

Darcy laughed humorlessly, pulling on her shoes and coat. “Keep dreaming, Hotshot.”

“Oh, I do.” He assured as she fished around her pockets for car keys.
Darcy tapped her chin approvingly. “Good. Am I super hot in all of those dreams?”

He nodded once, seemingly in pain. “Any hotter and my bed would be on fire.”

Humming, she stood on her toes, keeping both hands behind her back as she kissed him lightly on the lips. “I’ll catch you later, Storm.”

He licked his lips like the sexy bastard he was, eyes lighting up as he remembered something. “Hey, I forgot to tell you, Ashley, you know Ashley, he’s having a party this weekend. Go with me?”

Darcy made a face, “I think I’ll pass. I’m doing stuff.”

“Stuff.” Johnny repeated exasperatedly, crossing his arms. “You’re always doing stuff.”

The urge to tell him that, technically, she wasn’t even supposed to be a bum and watch TV with him after school because she had a fucking realm to help govern, gnawed at her nerves. Thankfully she suppressed it, turning on her heel to march out the door on a lighter note. “What can I say? I’m a busy gal.”

Johnny clearly wanted to press the matter. “Darce, I’m serious.”

“Oh what?” she asked, looking up into his light blue eyes. “Spongebob?”

He gave her a look. “No. I’m serious about…”

He trailed off, suddenly looking very bashful indeed. Darcy thought it was kinda cute to watch Johnny Storm fumble over his words. “What?” she probed, poking his forearm teasingly. “That six hours of South Park doesn’t equate to a date?”

He rolled his eyes, looking to the ceiling in what Darcy deemed reluctance. “Us, Darce. I’m serious about us.”

That wasn’t the answer Darcy was expecting. “Ookay. Well…”

“Darce, I’m serious.” He pleaded, laying his hands on her shoulders.

She blinked up at him, unsure as to how to process the information he was giving her. “I know. You just said you were serious. About us.”

“Well, I am.” He said decidedly. He sighed, bowing his head. “Look, I’ve never really been in a relationship with anyone this long and it’s weird cuz…”

“Cuz why?” Darcy encouraged with a smile, secretly wishing he would hurry up with everything he had to say. Not to sound like the uncaring, workaholic girlfriend, but there was a realm and a space prince that desperately needed her attention.

“Because I don’t want us to be over.” Johnny said like that small detail was the most bizarre thing ever to happen to him. “Most of the time, I just want to move on. I don’t want to move on past you, Darce. I like you; I always have liked you. I don’t even know why…I just do.” He paused to gauge her reaction, continuing to speak when he found her mouth gaping to a near comical extent. “I want to spend more time with you, in a totally non-clingy way. I just…I really like spending time with you and…you know…your ass.”

Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose. “There it is.”
Johnny shoved his hands in his pockets in a way that would normally look cool, but came off rather dorky given the context. “I guarantee I think about your ass more than I think about space.”

“That’s impressive considering the amount of space in your head.” She joked, tapping his forehead with her fingertip.

Smirking, he pushed down her hand. “Darce, please. Come with me to Ashley’s party this weekend. Bring Grace if you want. I don’t think you’ve ever been to a party.”

Darcy bit her lip in thought. It was true that she hadn’t been to a party before, at least not the kind Johnny was talking about. But she had important business to take care of.

The Asgardian court was more of a mess than usual. The impending war with Vanaheim was soon upon them and they were undecided as to what side they were taking.

One side of the court, namely the Norns, wanted to side with the Vanir nobility in the more Asgardian cultured society. They claimed that it was with this part of Vanaheim that the treaty binding Asgard to her sister realm was made and they ought to stay true to it. Lord Bjarte spoke at many conferences, rather than sending Erlend in his place as he had before, and chose instead to preach duty of the Aesir to the Nine Realms.

He was a convincing speaker, but if Darcy had the power in an international affairs meeting to disagree with him, she would have. Mainly because he would rant, for many precious hours, on ‘revealing the true nature of Asgard’s leadership’ to ‘demonstrate to Yggdrasil the power and influence the name of the Realm Eternal’s rulers till held.’

Darcy smelled a rat, but her hands were as good as bound when it came to setting a trap. She was a human in a room full of big, smelly elephants that couldn’t seem to stomp the mouse gnawing on their cankle skin.

Another, smaller, portion of the court was leaning towards siding with the Vanir tribal communities. They believed that since there were more people in the tribes than in the capital city, they could save more lives by killing the side with less people.

Darcy hated taking sides and was compelled to take an alternate route.

Queen Freya of Vanaheim was far from a figure head. Although she lived in the capital, all of Vanaheim abided by her word and law. Darcy had written her twice in attempt to devise a strategy with the Queen that might absolve Vanaheim of its conflict. She advised Darcy, vaguely and in the same sense that Frigga often did, to ‘win the war by warring with one’s self.’

Basically, it was the most obvious and useless advice anyone had ever given her and Darcy was left with her less than brilliant battle strategies. She wasn’t a warrior; she was an advisor.

Odin would make the final decision. Gods help them all.

It was because of this that Darcy shook her head, apologizing to her boyfriend. “I’m sorry Johnny. Maybe next time, alright? Give me a heads up and I’ll plan for it.”

Johnny was disappointed; she could tell by the intensity of his pout. He quickly brushed it aside. “Okay, Lewis. Next time. It’ll be a nice one, you know that, right?”

“Know what?” Darcy asked, her brows coming together.

“I only get the best for my girl.” Johnny said, kissing her again, smacking her ass with a self
satisfied smile. “I’ll see you around.”

“Bye, Hotshot.” She said, tugging on her hat before trotting out to her car.

Darcy got her license at the end of January as a congratulations present from her parents for acing all her midterms. Not that she worked especially hard on them, but they could probably tell she was going through a lot outside of her new relationship.

She wasn’t suffering from anxiety like she had been around the same time last year, and she wasn’t exactly under stress. But she was having nightmares.

The word ‘nightmare’ never painted a horrifying picture in Darcy’s head before. The concept of the word wasn’t scary. What was a bad dream compared to the true terrors that existed in the wide, wide world?

Darcy was coming to know exactly what was so terribly about nightmares. She couldn’t be physically tortured in her dreams, but as she was coming to learn, physical isn’t even where the true pain began.

The night she and Loki returned on Astrid, Darcy knew something was off about her friend.

At first, she thought, perhaps, he realized that she had been a good few seconds away from grabbing his face and kissing the lights out of him had it not been for Peter Quill and his ridiculous music. She had quickly tossed the thought. The minute she told Loki that they should stop pursuing the infinity stones, she could see his mind working.

The gears in his brain, the ones that worked overtime…the ones that never stopped…were grinding her friend to bits. And with his downfall also went their friendship.

He left her. After she had been tortured by Taneleer Tivan and traveled through the god damned galaxy to find his ever loving ass flirting/getting his ass beat by a green space chick, Loki took her home, saw to it that she got into bed, and then went back to Asgard. Even with Frank and Fenrir there with her, Darcy had never felt more alone.

Loki stopped sleeping in her bed from that night onwards. Based on how his eyes looked, he’d stopped sleeping period.

She still saw him, of course, but there was something very wrong about him and everyday he looked worse.

Her room was dark when she entered, the sun having passed long ago and the moon hidden by the clouds.

Loki was there, nonetheless, waiting in his armor, cold and black, to take her to Asgard so she could do her job as his advisor. His gaze shot to her as soon as she opened the door, his face almost completely blank.

It was shocking how much he seemed to change over the past months. He looked more like a man than ever and less like the boy that used to write in his journal with green crayon.

He was thinner…leaner than he had been before their encounter with the power stone. It looked less like he’d lost weight and more like he’d been doing a different kind of exercise other than fighting with Thor. Not to mention he was pale…paler than he ever was before, his pallor emphasized by the dark circles under his eyes.
“Loki,” Darcy breathed, resisting the urge to go and take him in her arms and hug the pain away. She’d tried once before, around the turn of the New Year, two weeks after her first date with Johnny. Loki left the night before after she gave him a stack of letters to send out to important people in far away provinces. He didn’t come back again till January second, looking like someone had locked him alone in a dark room with no solace but his own mind.

She’d hugged him. It was natural…it was like breathing for Darcy to hold Loki. To kiss his palms, to touch his face and to play with his hair…all were as simple as anything she’d ever known. She never thought about it; she never had to.

One could imagine her utter surprise and heartbreak when he stiffened at her touch and backed away. He didn’t stay more than a few minutes, just long enough to tell her that regular visits to Asgard would resume the following day.

She tried talking to him. She tried hugging him, holding his hand, gently pleading, angrily yelling. His reaction was only ever the same expression. Loki never was good at masking his emotions; they were always plain on his face, even when he tried not to show them.

He was in pain. Awful, fearful pain. And he wasn’t letting her help him. She wondered if that’s what it had been like for him when she was going through the rougher part of her bouts with anxiety. For that reason, she exercised patience. Maybe he just needed time.

With this thought in mind, Darcy swallowed, her heart constricting at the sight of him. “Sorry I’m late. I got caught up at Johnny’s.”

His jaw clenched tightly for a full three seconds before relaxing, his mouth twitching as his voice caught a tone that lacked compassion or hostility, moodiness or mischief. “Of course.”

She waited for more. She wondered if he might ask how she was or if she was ready to go.

He didn’t and Darcy bit her lip, “I’m staying for the weekend. On Asgard, I mean. I’ve got stuff to do.”

Loki’s pretty green eyes were the only part of him that stayed true, defacing the emotionless mask he wore as he cast her double. “Very well.”

After a hesitant, silent moment, she ducked under her bed, her breath catching when he took her hand to take them away. Traveling between realms was the closest she ever got to him nowadays. She wondered how much longer she could take it.

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Sigyn took in the scene around her with a sense of detachment. She saw Darcy’s legs being knocked from under her for the fifteenth time that afternoon and Sif explaining a counter-attack while giving a brief demonstration. She saw Loki watching not ten paces away from where she stood, his eyes set in deep concentration as he watched Darcy fight.

It seemed that the air was mocking her miseries with its icy, unrelenting bite. Hard snowflakes whipped her across the face, adding chill to her already stone cold grimace. Although she wore her furs and gloves, there was nothing warm about Sigyn that day. The only thing that offered her the slightest semblance of heat in any part of her body was a small dark bruise in the side of Sif’s neck that Sigyn had put there not long before she and Darcy began to duel. The mark of her affection was already starting to fade.

It occurred to Sigyn that no matter how deeply or how truly she loved her lady, they could not be
together as she wished. And, the more Sigyn thought about her and Sif’s partnership, what did she have to offer? Sif was a warrior. A heroine.

And what was Sigyn? A lady?

Perhaps she was a lady. She looked like one and she lived like one. But she did not feel like one. She was bored of their games and tired of their monotonous lifestyles. She wanted something new. She wanted to be something new. She wanted to be more…more for Sif. Sif deserved someone who was more than an idle being whose closest ali was her bitterness.

Sigyn envied the person Sif deserved, for she was not her.

Darcy sustained a thorough hit to her middle before toppling over once again. Loki’s fists tightened in response, the skin of his knuckles whiter than the snow that fell around them.

She sighed, stepping towards him. Loki and Darcy were not as they typically were.

Neither of them looked well rested. Loki’s pale complexion had gone from a delicate pallor to a sickening blankness, as if he was void of color save his eyes which seemed to darken with intensity every passing second. He did a poor job of hiding how unhappy he was.

Darcy, while she looked equally as tired, appeared to be a great deal happier. Her cheeks were blushed red and her smiles were bright and frequent. From her distracted dreamy grins and occasional mindless giggles, Sigyn detected a new love in Darcy’s life. It took little coaxing one night they took to Darcy’s bed for Darcy to tell them that she was courting someone.

She wouldn’t relay any of the details, which led Sigyn to believe that they were below her class. However, Darcy did let slip that her lover was, in fact, a man.

At first, Sigyn believed this was the cause of Loki’s displeasure. Not only had Darcy chosen a man, contrary to his previous notion that she only liked women, but that man was also a commoner. She had chosen a peasant man over a Prince of Asgard.

But the more Sigyn considered Loki, how he held himself, how he looked at her, she could tell it was more than that.

Tenderly, she squeezed his arm, hesitant to touch him due to his tense posture. He looked like a dangerous creature, black hair whipping in the wind, entangling itself with frozen snow, and eyes shaded in the dark mask of tiredness. He was ready to pounce.

He jumped, like she suspected, but she held onto his upper arm, concern seeping into her touch. He relaxed, placing his bare, long fingered hand over her gloved one. “Hello Sigyn.”

She attempted a smile, her muscles not quite mustering the energy to maintain it. “Aren’t you cold, Loki? You’ve been standing here for nearly as long as I have.”

He gave a curt shake of his head, thin lips pursing together and adding emphasis to the lines of his face. It surprised Sigyn, for a moment, as she noticed how masculine Loki had come to look. Grant it, he was not Thor, his features were sharper and his body was narrower. Sigyn found that, while women attracted her lust and love, she could appreciate the looks of men as she might a flower in Frigga’s garden or a nice wine from Alfheim.

Loki was perhaps, in Sigyn’s opinion, one of the finer wines.

“I am fine.” He told her shortly as Sif blacked one of Darcy’s attacks and sent her to the ground.
Darcy was doing fairly well for fighting Sif. Though she had no strength, she showed a surprising amount of resilience. Loki frowned nonetheless, the muscles in his arm becoming impossibly more rigid.

Sigyn patted his hand. “You do not have to watch, you know. Sif will not hurt Darcy permanently.”

He didn’t respond, jaw clenching as Darcy dodged one of Sif’s attacks. Sigyn knew Loki and Darcy had always been close; but how close they were was more of a mystery. Darcy was an affectionate little lady and Sigyn remembered her easy embraces and casual hand holding with fondness. She extended her care to anyone she called a friend. But Darcy’s affection never looked more natural than when she and Loki were together.

That was why Sigyn worried.

Loki seemed ill and Darcy looked like she hadn’t gotten a proper night’s sleep since the change of season. It was clear that a force beyond life and death had taken hold of them, only to be encouraged by their stupidity.

“Well, it’s not as if you can’t protect her.” Sigyn told him softly, blinking snow flurries out of her lashes.

The sharp lines of his face hardened and for a moment Sigyn thought he was going to express his anger. It scared her to see Loki so unlike himself.

Before he could say anything, Darcy was thrown to the ground again. Only this time, she didn’t stand up. Loki’s entire posture changed, leaning forward like he was ready to leap from the balcony and rush to her aid.

Sigyn tightened her grip on his upper arm as Sif bent over Darcy’s body in concern. Suddenly, Darcy’s arms shot up and using her hands and legs, she brought Sif to the ground and positioned one of her swords to her neck. Her victorious, “Bitchin’!” could be heard from where she and Loki stood.

Loki seemed to deflate, whether from relief or pure exhaustion, Sigyn didn’t know. He ran a hand through his hair. The ends were getting long, curling up on his collar. Darcy had accidentally said one night that Loki’s hair was always curly when he woke up before he combed it or magicked it into place.

From the ground, Darcy looked in their general direction and squinted. She mentioned on occasion that she couldn’t see very well and Sigyn often wondered why she didn’t see Eir with her impairment.

Recognizing them or Loki more importantly, she raised a tentative hand to wave at them. Loki nodded once in her direction, waiting for her to give her attention to Sif again before turning away.

“Good day, Sigyn.” He said, quietly so she could just hear him over the wind, and kissed the back of her hand. “Do stay warm.”

Sigyn grimaced as he walked away, Jörmungandr appearing out of nowhere to slither up his body and rest around his shoulders.

She would not be keeping very warm for quite some time, for the only spark of heat was centered at the light of her life. And she would sooner have her lady to herself than she could hold all the stars in Yggdrasil in her hands.
Bitterly, she glared down at the fight, folding her hands tightly in front of her and suffering through the cold.

“I find watching the fights quite dull, really. There are much more interesting things than people attempting to wound one another, don’t you think, Lady Sigyn?”

The blonde haired lady whipped around at the sound of Queen Frigga’s voice. She hastened into a curtsy. “I agree, Allmother.”

The Queen wore a dark blue cloak and her hair was done up with intricate gold pins. Sigyn decided the Queen was too good for King Odin. She was beautiful, intelligent, and yelled a lot less. Also, she did not have a habit of marrying off their obnoxious eldest son to the lady least wanting of him.

Frigga smiled, as if understanding all of Sigyn’s woes. She held out her hand and Sigyn took it, marveling in the warmth of the Queen’s hands. “Tell me, Sigyn, you are so unhappy lately, is there anything I could do that could make it better? Despite the obvious, of course.”

Sigyn nearly choked on her tongue as the Allmother’s glanced to Sif then back at the blonde lady knowingly. “Your Majesty…I—"

Frigga patted her hand reassuringly, “Do not fuss over it, dear. Now, tell me what troubles you most days. I see you grow angrier and angrier with each passing second.”

Sighing, Sigyn gripped Queen Frigga’s fingers tightly, as if grasping onto some power to maintain her complacency. She was very angry.

“I am bored, Your Highness. And I daresay, I have never felt so useless in all my life.” Sigyn meant to stop talking, but suddenly every awful thought she’d ever had about her life came spilling out at that moment. “I have no talents or skills. I don’t enjoy sewing and I cannot pass the time pine after men of the court. In a land where honor is everything and the only duty I’ve ever been given is to honor my parents by gaining a better name. My name is renowned as the image of the perfect lady because I am quiet and have been groomed my entire life to be some man’s bride. A man with no regard for delicacy or anything but the biggest shock he can cause when he pulls out his hammer.”

Frigga cocked her brow and it took Sigyn a moment to realize all that she said. Apologetically she held out her hands and Frigga hushed her with a giggle. “Oh child, do not be sorry for speaking your mind. Did Sif not tell you once it was better to do that?”

Sigyn smiled fondly down at her lady as she planted Darcy’s face in the mud. “Yes. Perhaps I needed reminding.”

“Perhaps.” Frigga agreed, “Although you do have a fair point, Sigyn. It is never good to be without purpose. I have a proposition for you.”

Sigyn blinked a few times in shock, her skin buzzing with excitement. “A proposition? Of course, Your Majesty.”

From her cloak, the Allmother removed a large envelope and handed it to the lady. “These are papers approving your new apprenticeship. I’ve had a horse prepared for you whenever you’re ready.”

The world was moving too fast for Sigyn to keep steady footing and she almost stumbled when Frigga released her hand. “Your Majesty…who will I be apprenticing for?”
Frigga took a moment to answer, nodding her head back and forth indecisively. “He is…an old friend. I think you’ll like him.”

Those were her parting words and even a few moments following them being said, Sigyn was left to contemplate her life decisions as she tightened her cloak around her shoulders and headed for the stables. She might as well not delay the future.

The stable hands told her it was an awful day for riding, Sigyn requested Frigga’s prepared horse and they helped her up with ease. They assured her the horse knew where it was going, though Queen Frigga had been just as vague with its final destination as she’d been with Sigyn.

The white stallion Frigga chose for her Sigyn recognized as Thor’s steed, Gareth, and Sigyn wondered if the Queen wanted her to die of humiliation. Mounting anything of Thor’s was a disgrace to even think about.

Not that it mattered. Thor hardly rode anywhere. He either walked or flew with that hammer of his. Besides, Loki and Darcy shared a horse, did they not? And they were…

Oh, who were they trying to fool? They were infatuated with one another.

Sigyn fumed internally about the implications of her riding Thor’s horse and she hoped no one could see her through the storm.

Gareth didn’t seem to mind the cold too much and Sigyn clung to his white, warm hide for heat as they passed through the city.

Sigyn had ventured out into the capital before, though mostly for royal events. Courting princes required that one be seen with the prince they were courting. But she never went out like the rest of the ladies did. Clothes shopping, exploring, indulging in festivals…she never did. Her parents were strict. She never left the palace, for they feared she might do something ridiculous like fall hard enough in love with a commoner to elope with them.

What a shame that would be.

Even though Sigyn was forced into reclusion, she still noticed when Gareth started heading farther away from the shops and tradesmiths. Soon, they had ventured out of the heart of the city and not to long after that, they were walking the line of the city limits near a great stone wall. A cobblestone path, coated thick with ice and snow, guided Gareth along their way. Eventually, the path became completely covered and Sigyn noticed Gareth slowing down, as if uncertain.

She pursed her lips, wondering what she could possibly do to make sure she did not end up stranded, when a dark figure flickered in the distance.

Sigyn squinted against the storm as the figure emerged from the blizzard like a shadow. It was a horse with a mane blacker than night and half of it skeletal and dead.

It was Loki and Darcy’s horse. Hel. She didn’t make any sound. While Gareth grunted and blew hot breaths into the frozen air, Hel was silent as she became their guide, leading Gareth down the proper path.

Sigyn did not know much about Hel. Only that she had been Loki’s horse for as long as anyone could remember and when she was younger, she broke her leg. Loki tried to fix it magically and her flesh fell away on the side he healed. He thought he’d killed her, but the next morning she was awake and standing as if nothing was wrong.
That incident was the start of Loki’s social exile. After word got around of what he’d done to his horse, rumors started that he was a dangerous child, heartless and magical.

Sigyn had always been aware of Loki, even if she showed no interest in him till her adolescent years. He was a prince. And even with all the rumors, she never thought Loki was cruel or mean. He was different. He spent most of his time alone if he wasn’t clinging to his mother’s side like the floor was going to fall from around him.

And even though she caused him trouble, Loki kept Hel. The only two people the horse had ever truly behaved for and didn’t run away from were Loki and Frigga. Then Loki met Darcy and she became the little lady’s horse as well as Loki’s.

Now she was guiding Sigyn and Thor’s horse through the storm as if it were nothing.

Suddenly, Gareth stopped and Sigyn realized they had come to their destination. The supposed place of Sigyn’s apprenticeship was a large hut, seemingly built into the side of a large mountain. The doors were large and brass. To the side was a stable with insulated walls.

Quickly, Sigyn dismounted Gareth and she led him to the stables, pleased to find that it was warm inside and there was fresh hay and warm water. Sigyn stroked his mane a few times, unsure of how to care for a horse. Should she thank him?

“Well done, Gareth.” She complimented and the steed snorted, as if in agreement. She smirked, thinking that this horse was indeed Thor’s. Rigidly, Sigyn stepped back into the storm where Hel awaited her.

Sigyn could not recall ever being scrutinized by a horse before, but there was no arguing that Hel was doing anything less than judging the blonde lady in all that she was. Sigyn narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. She was being critiqued and studied by almost every damn person on Asgard; she didn’t have time to add a horse to that list.

She was about to tell the horse to leave, when it occurred to her that Hel was staring less like a judgmental lady and more like a wide eyed child that was being introduced to a stranger for the first time.

As it turned out, Sigyn never really was good with children. She feared the day when she would have to birth Thor’s. The last thing in the world she wanted were children. Even so, she sympathized with Hel and tenderly reached out a hand to her.

Faster than Thor’s lightening and quieter than Loki’s magic, she was gone, black and bone lost in the snowy abyss.

After the initial shock of her hasty departure, Sigyn quickly made her way inside the mountainside hut. She slipped in through a small crack in the door, pondering the last time she opened a door herself. Ever since her engagement to Thor, Einherjar had been stationed outside her bedroom.

She pushed open the door only enough for her to get inside and it closed shut behind her.

Sigyn hadn’t known what to expect upon entering. How could she even begin to imagine what fantastical ideas flew through Queen Frigga’s mind? But she had considered the idea that perhaps the Allmother wanted her to be a sorceress's apprentice or assist in the realm’s archives. Instead, she found herself in what appeared to be a blacksmith’s shop.

Swords and war hammers hung on the walls, their gleaming surfaces shining down on her. A few candles were lit around the place, giving the shop a warm kind of glow. A suit of armor stood in
the corner, silver and shiny. At the front of the small store was an enormous, roughly carved wooden desk, piled high with stacks of sealed scrolls. Overall, Sigyn liked it in an odd kind of way. It was in no way grand or rich like the palace, but warm and quaint. It felt like it could be someone’s home.

Curiously, she glanced around the shop, looking for the person she was to be apprenticing for. There didn’t seem to be any stairs leading to an upper level and no one showed when she called out.

With a short huff and an impatient frown, Sigyn ran her fingers through her wet hair, scraping out the melting chunks of snow. As she walked the length of the store, something caught her eye. On the ground just behind the clerk’s counter appeared to be another door. This one was wooden, square, and imbedded in the ground. A large brass handle was planted on the opposite side of two well oiled hinges.

Steeling herself, Sigyn approached the door and pulled up on the handle.

Cold air and the smell of smoke channeled up from the depths, followed swiftly by the sound of hammering. A sturdy wooden ladder sloped downwards to a brightly lit space. Deciding that she did not have all that much to lose, Sigyn made her way down the rungs into the space below.

What she saw took her breath away.

The space below the shop was not a cellar or drafty cell, but rather a cave. Gray stone walls inlaid with dully shining supports surrounded her, wooden floor boards coated the ground where she stood, but led off to hard granite. Several doors were set in the walls, each one just as thick and as big as the last.

Yet it was the end of the cave that captured Sigyn’s attention.

The cavern overlooked a lake, a small one, enclosed by the mountain she had ridden Gareth so long to find. White water rushed down a waterfall on the opposite side, spilling clear, crystal water into the lake and stirring the snow on the surface. A few ice covered trees straggled near the edge of the water, their roots tangled in spots of crumbling rock.

At the mouth of the cavern sat the source of the hammering.

A forge was stationed near the water. It’s base was comprised of several layers of brick and stone and the coals radiated heat that contrasted greatly with the freezing weather.

A blacksmith stood beside it, one great hand holding in place a red-hot metal plate while the other gripped a massive hammer. With every clang, every pound of metal hitting metal, Sigyn took another step towards the smith. And with every step, she noticed how enormous he was.

Sigyn had seen a great deal of large, burly men. To be certain, she was marrying, perhaps, one of the largest, burliest men ever to walk Asgardian soil.

However, this blacksmith was a giant for sure. He was taller than Thor and his girth seemed larger than Volstagg’s. Only this man did not seem rotund as Volstagg was, rather just solid. His bones could have been as wide as Sigyn’s fists and his skin as thick Bilgesnipe hide. As he pounded away, Sigyn saw his muscles, substantial and rope-like, move under his shirt and apron.

She was so entranced by the man that she hardly noticed how close she’d gotten to him until he ceased his pounding.
Sigyn’s heart fluttered in fear and she quickly pushed the feeling away, squaring her shoulders as the blacksmith turned to face her.

His beard was coarse, short, brown, streaked with gray and singed around the edges and he looked extremely disgruntled. “Who the Hel are you?”

Sigyn lifted her chin haughtily, maintaining her regal position. She was a lady, and one man’s questioning would not make her forget otherwise. “I am Lady Sigyn.”

The blacksmith cocked a bushy eyebrow at her. “Good to know. Now why, by the gods, are you in my shop?”

Already, Sigyn could tell that she was going to have a difficult time with this man. Perhaps Frigga had sent her to the wrong location, surely she did not mean for Sigyn, heiress of Jolena, to be a blacksmith’s apprentice.

She answered the man nonetheless. “The Allmother sent me for an apprenticeship.”

This remark seemed to settle the blacksmith immensely as he dipped the metal he’d been beating first into the lake and then let it sit in a small, circular water basin beside the forge. “Did you bring the papers?”

Sigyn who had not expected that question, hesitated for a moment before reaching into her cloak and pulling out the sealed scroll Frigga had given her. The blacksmith moved to a large table opposite the room and began cutting and stretching bits of leather.

She held it out to him from where she stood as the man clearly paid her no mind. Perhaps it was a ruffian’s custom to be rude to their guests. Irritated, she continued to hold out the paper, refusing to walk close to him. He asked for the papers; let it be him who accepts them from her.

Only the blacksmith didn’t even turn around. He didn’t do anything but play with his leathers for what could have been an hour. Finally, he spoke in his rough, gravelly tone. “Read it to me.”

Sigyn wanted to be daring enough to ask why, but she was a lady by forced nature, and ladies never asked ‘why’. Instead, she grit her teeth, breaking the seal on the scroll and reading aloud:

“Dearest Baldur, I am pleased to inform you that I have found you an apprentice. Sigyn is one of my ladies and she has been for most of her life. I know titles are unimportant to you, but hers will be given the circumstances. Her parents are High Lord and Lady of Jolena, I am sure you’re familiar with them and their occasionally off-putting means of requesting your work.”

Baldur chortled a little and made a face. Sigyn scowled in memory of her parents and read on.

“That being said, they have strict rules pertaining to Sigyn especially since she has recently been engaged to my eldest, Thor.” Sigyn paused for a moment, admiring how Frigga talked about her children like they weren’t princes of the Realm Eternal. “Her apprenticeship with you shall be discreet and I will be her investor. You’ll soon see that all of your qualifications are met with Lady Sigyn. Most Sincerely, Frigga.”

Baldur sighed heavily, putting down his tools and Sigyn flipped the paper over, noticing a note written in purple ink.

“Post statement, from Darcy: Baldur, Sigyn is just as, if not more, grumpy than you. Be nice and you’ll work well together.”
Sigyn narrowed her eyes at Darcy’s statement. She was not grumpy. Angry, perhaps, but she had good reason to be.

The blacksmith tapped his fingers against his worktable for a few seconds. At last he spoke to her. “Sigyn, is it?”

“Yes.” She answered as he paced his shop, grabbing a stool beside his forge and heaving himself down upon it.

“Well Sigyn,” he said, propping his hand on his knee. “Let me see your hands.”

Instinctively, Sigyn pulled her fingers into fists inside her gloves, glaring at him, expecting an explanation.

He narrowed his big brown eyes, “Look, if you’re going to be my apprentice, I need to know what kind of hands you’ve got.”

Relenting, Sigyn stepped forwards, her back stiff as she held out her palms to him.

Baldur reached for her hands and she thought his touch might be too rough, or that the size of his fingers might crush her bones.

Instead, he removed her gloves quickly and with certain finesse that Sigyn hadn’t known anyone to possess. He tossed the gloves aside, studying her hands with interest. His bushy black brows came together and his enormous thumbs were almost as large as her palms.

Baldur turned them over and grunted in what could have been humor or disapproval. She wasn’t sure.

“These aren’t terrible hands.” He told her at last, still holding onto her fingers. “You’re a lady, but these fingers aren’t made for delicate work. You don’t sew. You don’t write. Clearly you don’t fight, even with a dagger. You’re not a musician. You’re not an artist. You don’t practice sorcery. You don’t cook and I get the feeling you don’t do a lot of gardening.”

Sigyn scowled as he smirked at her hands.

“Young nails look nice, but you didn’t do them yourself.” He bent her thumb to more closely examine a knuckle. “But these are strong hands. They spend more time in fists than any fighting man, yet they are idle. You have practice neither wielding a blade nor studying the art of making them, so why, Lady Sigyn, are you here?”

Sigyn kept her eyes locked on his, daring him to insult her position. “You need an apprentice and Queen Frigga felt I would fit your requirements.”

“A little lady who does nothing but read? A book is all these hands have ever carried.” He touched her knuckles with his hard calloused fingertips. “Mild experience with a bow, but you’re not terribly interested in killing. Your dedication to the craft has nothing to do with improving your archery. That being said, what can you do, Lady Sigyn? What do you do with yourself?”

Sigyn almost said ‘Sif’ because it would have been an honest response. However, she didn’t believe sex was the answer Baldur was looking for. But besides being engaged to Thor, being friends with Darcy and Loki, and loving her lady, there wasn’t much Sigyn did. She answered him honestly. “Nothing.”

“Nothing.” Baldur grunted again and Sigyn declared to herself that he was visually the epitome of
everything she found unattractive about men. “Sounds boring.”

“Quite.” Sigyn said in return and Baldur gave her a long, hard, searching look.

“Give me one good reason why I should allow you to be my apprentice.”

Sigyn grit her teeth, returning Baldur’s scrutiny. She didn’t ask to be his apprentice. It was offered to her and the only reason why she accepted was because she was bored. She’d been bored her entire life. She had nothing. No skill. No interest. She needed something and so she jumped on the opportunity given to her.

But if she had to deal with another pig-headed man feel that she had some worth to herself, she wouldn’t do it. She’d find another way.

Bitterly, she pulled her hands from Baldur’s and gave a single word answer. “No.”

No, indeed. She was entitled. She didn’t have any reason, let alone a good one, as to why he should make her his apprentice. She already had to prove to the entire realm that she was worthy enough to wed the Crowned Prince of Asgard, she didn’t have enough in her to prove anything more. So let him deal with—

“There’s a shed not far down the road where I keep my spare tools. I’ll write you a list and you can get familiar with all of them. Then come back and you can get started.” Baldur said, hefting himself up from his stool. “I expect you here every other day from sunrise till sunset. If you’re not here, you’d better have a damn good excuse.”

And thus Sigyn’s apprenticeship began.

***

“Okay, so, my mom thinks I’m chilling at your place, Darce. She will never know I third wheeled you and your smoking bit of man-candy to one of Ashley’s parties.” Grace said from the backseat of Johnny’s four door pick-up truck. “She will never know how short and tight this dress is. She will never know that I rode in a vehicle that uses almost as much gasoline as a small commercial airplane. She will never know that the guy driving said vehicle has only one hand on the fucking steering wheel. She will never—“

“Grace,” Darcy interrupted, turning around in her seat to look back at her best friend. “Everything is fine. It’s a party, not a rave.”

Grace took a few steadying breaths, pulling up the top of her sleeveless dress. Technically it was Darcy’s dress, which is why it was a bit big in the boob area, but Grace made it work. “Right. Okay. Johnny?”

“Yes Grace?” Johnny said from the front seat, giving Darcy’s hand a squeeze as he made a right turn. Darcy’s heart did a thing as he did so, feeling foolish for crushing so hard on her boyfriend.

“On a scale of one to ten, how much intoxication, violence, and arson amongst other illegal activities happen at these party things?” Grace asked in a meek voice. “And will there be red solo cups and if so, when can I give my speech about the dangers of not recycling plastic materials? Also,” she added as they made a left turn, “Use your fucking turning signal, you hot piece of ass.”

Johnny sighed in exasperation, “Well to be honest, it depends on the party. There most definitely will be red solo cups and you cannot give your speech unless you’re willing to fight someone…” he thought about what he’d just said. “Okay, just don’t give the speech.” He finished his answer by
deliberately turning on his turning signal for the next right turn.

Darcy laughed and pinched the back of his hand. “Be nice. Grace can fight whoever she wants.”

“Damn straight.” Grace said indignantly, “And her mother will never find out how many people she fights.

Darcy had finally agreed to go to one of Ashley’s parties with Johnny. Over a month had passed since she promised him she would find the time and she could tell he was super excited about the whole thing.

April was coming around and it was just starting to get warm again. Johnny still wore a leather jacket because he swore up and down it was going to rain later.

On Asgard, the snow had melted and the Frigga’s tulips were beginning to sprout. And as the weather began to heat, as did Vanheim’s tensions. Any day now Darcy was expecting the proverbial message from Queen Freya declaring the war. And yet the Asgardian court was still as indecisive as ever they were about whose side Asgard was to take. It was apparent that Odin would be the one to have the final say in the matter.

He would give each member of the court who had an opinion the option to give their induction as to why they should take either side and he would announce his verdict the following morning.

The meeting for said testimonies was this evening and Darcy had to be sure to be back in her room by midnight so Loki could take her to Asgard and she could try her best to convince him to get to that meeting.

Speaking of Loki…

What was she going to do with him?

He hadn’t been attending any meeting and he wasn’t talking to her…at all. Somehow, they were on lesser speaking terms than they were a month ago and that’s saying something. It was making her fucking angry.

Who was Loki to determine which way their friendship went? Did he have a problem with her? With Johnny? If so, he should just come out and say it. He should stop just receding into his little corner of Loki miseries and talk to her. Loki and his dumb, pretty face…

She couldn’t be that hard on him. There was something else going on that he wasn’t telling her besides his evident incapability to alert her of anything in his life. Something was very wrong with Loki and Darcy had no idea how to stop it when he kept pushing her away. The more she tried, the harder he pushed.

“We’re here.” Johnny said, his voice tearing Darcy away from her thoughts.

Grace inhaled deeply through her nose and let it slowly out her mouth. “I can do this.”

“You can.” Johnny encouraged. “If worse comes to worst, just go chill with the stoners. I’m sure you guys will have a lot to talk about.”

Grace snorted, elegantly flinging herself out of the car, “Yeah right. I, Johnny Storm, am what they call a professional grower and I do not associate with those plebeians.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, scooting out of the car and adjusting her little black dress so it held her
boobs just right. “Grace, you have one plant in a rainbow pot. Calm the fuck down.”

“Not on your life, Lewis.” She said, closing the truck door and gazing up at Ashley’s house. “It still looks the same on the outside as it did when we were kids.”

Johnny wrapped an arm around Darcy’s waist, weaving them in between the numerous cars in the driveway and giving her ass a squeeze. “You guys were friends with Ashley? She doesn’t seem like your type of crowd.”

Darcy shrugged, thinking back to the falling out they’d had last year. It had happened right after Loki’s almost-assassination, so Darcy had already been in a pit of anxiety as it was. The falling out was less of a dramatic break and more of an expected end. She hadn’t been hanging out with Ashley a lot anyways and Grace was always complaining about her. Darcy didn’t have a whole lot of time to stress over the situation.

Grace yelled at Ashley for being a stuck up bitch that only cared about herself and hurt other people to get what she wanted. Darcy had agreed, standing behind her as Ashley ranted on about how it was never the three of them that hung out anymore, it was always just ‘Grace and Darcy’. And of course, Darcy never had any time to do anything anyways, so what was the point in being her friend?

All in all, it was a shit show and Darcy was glad it was done and over with.

Well, that’s how she felt about it. She didn’t know how Ashley felt that she and Grace were Johnny’s plus two.

“Yeah. We were on the same soccer team in middle school.” Darcy commented.

“And you both had the biggest crush on Nick Benedict.” Grace added. “Well, she did. You did until he kissed you.”

Darcy made a face as she recalled her first kiss and Loki teasing her directly afterwards. “’Idiot boy’.” She quoted aloud.

Johnny laughed, “No way, Nick was your first kiss? Was it awful? He’s here tonight, you know. We could always have him get a re-try.”

Grace hooted and Darcy jabbed her boyfriend in the ribs with her elbow. “Not on my life, Johnny Boy.”

They reached the door and before they could open it, someone came tumbling outside, tripping over their shoelaces. Darcy recognized him as Ashley’s younger brother, Franklin. Of course, everyone just called him Foggy. He was a sophomore, the exact opposite of his older sister, and kind of a sweetie pie. “Hey Foggy.”

Quickly, he stood up, brushing off his jeans sheepishly. “Hey! Grace! Darcy! And…” he hesitated, blinking when he saw who was with them. “Johnny Storm! I was just heading out. Dad and Anna are out tonight…” he looked back at the house and the loud music issuing from it, “…which you could have already guessed. Ashley’ll probably be happy to see you.”

Darcy and Grace shared a look. “Yeaaah. Maybe.”

Grace smirked, “So, where you off to, Foggy? I thought you always stuck around for Ashley’s parties.”
Foggy waved his finger at her. “That was the old Foggy, the new Foggy wants to be a lawyer and needs a clean record. My meddling criminal sister is attempting to ruin my life plans.”

“That’s Ashley for ya.” Grace said bitterly, looking to the house, “Are the stoners present?”

Foggy nodded, “They’ve got the couch in the basement. There’s, like, twelve bongs down there.”

“Fabulous.” Grace said, adjusting her dress once more so her breasts looked extra boobilicious. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go find my people. Darcy, come and find me later. Bye Foggy.”

“Bye Grace.” Foggy waved, smiling cheerily. “Alright, well, I’ll catch you guys later. While you’re in there, you should totally try the guacamole. I made it myself with some super fresh avocados. Also, Ashley broke into Dad’s liquor cabinet. Beware old dude alcohol.”

“Will do, Foggy.” Darcy confirmed happily. “See you around.”

He waved once more before he was off, walking down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets. Johnny gazed down at her through squinted eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“Sure.” Darcy shrugged. “Why not? He was always nice to Grace and I when we came over. Grace usually spent more time with Ashley than I did. I’m always super—“

“Busy.” Johnny finished for her, letting go of her waist and jerking his head to the door. “I know. Come on, let’s party.”

Concerned by Johnny’s change in attitude, Darcy followed him inside, instantly making up her mind that the party scene really wasn’t for her. Loud music was playing and people stood around in groups, talking and sipping out of plastic red-solo cups. It was smoky, dimly lit, and smelled strongly of weed. Her palm was sweaty against Johnny’s as he led her through the throng of people to a small group in the living room.

Darcy recognized them from school. Most were senior guys and they all greeted Johnny with wide grins and manly ‘bro’ handshakes. They talked about how great the party was and how Ashley always knew how to get the best booze.

Johnny introduced her with a flourish and all the guys gawked in a way that made her feel extremely uncomfortable.

As Loki’s advisor, she was used to having people stare at her. She frequently gave speeches at festivals and ceremonies, she spoke out at meetings, she danced with special lords on certain occasions…she wasn’t unaccustomed to attention.

But no one ever stared at her like these guys were. Their focus was on her body and her hair, her outfit and the way it made her boobs look. Darcy knew she looked good, and she didn’t have a problem with people admiring how crazy stupid fine she washed up to be. But the fashion in which they stared wasn’t admiration so much as it was a showcase.

And it was Johnny Storm who had put her on display.

“Damn, Lewis, you look fine.” One of his friends said and she didn’t bother to look even remotely
flattered.

“I know.” She said with enough bitterness to flavor a coffee bean as she turned away from them. “I’m going to get a drink.”

Johnny pulled her back for a moment to kiss her lips and pinch her ass. She allowed it, hoping her sour attitude soiled the kiss for him. As she walked away, she heard them whistle.

“Damn, Johnny, what devil did you sell your soul to for that?”

“Yeah man, we all knew she had sweater puppies, but Jesus Christ…”

“Darcy Lewis, who knew…”

“She a good fuck?”

Darcy was out of range before she could hear Johnny’s response to any of the questions. She smiled grimly to herself as she thought of how Johnny might answer that last one without lying.

They’d been together four months and thus far they’d only gotten to oral. Darcy was extremely proud of the fact that her first blow job experience was a hit. She seemed to have a natural talent for that particular area of pleasure….amongst other things.

And Johnny wasn’t bad either. Grant it, he wasn’t Sharon Carter. But, to be fair, who could compete with Sharon Carter?

Angrily, Darcy found herself in the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of water from the refrigerator. She considered drinking a beer, but thought better of it. Drinking was something that most people did on Asgard. She wasn’t looking for an opportunity to get drunk or buzzed. It was imperative that she keep a level head for later that night when Odin’s selective council meeting began. Darcy had to be there to take Loki’s place if he ended up being absent…again.

Irritated with all of the men in her life, Darcy crumpled the red-solo cup in her hand, making angry sounds at it. Mentally, she imagined it was a cross between Loki and Johnny’s heads and she happily squished them into plastic smithereens

“Darcy?”

Darcy whipped around, quickly and with a great deal of casualness, tossing the cup aside. Standing beside the island in the kitchen was her old friend Ashley Nelson.

“Oh, hey Ashley. Fancy seeing you here, seeing as how it is your house and your party.” Darcy rambled awkwardly.

Ashley crossed her freckled arms, her carrot orange hair curled and falling down around her shoulders. She looked pretty angry. “Yeah. Imagine that. You weren’t invited, Darcy.”

Every inch of her soul seemed to cringe at that moment and she sheepishly rocked back and forth on her heels. “Ah…well…you see, I’m actually somebody’s plus one. So, technically I’m not crashing your party, right?”

Her expression became furious. “Did Johnny bring you?”

“What happens if I answer ‘yes’?” Darcy asked, “Will there be cake?”

Ashley sighed, deflating as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “You really haven’t changed have
“Well,” Darcy said, looking herself up and down, “I wouldn’t say that. I grew some, my boobs got
bigger. I guess puberty is good for some things, amiright?”

Ashley shook her head, “I can’t believe he’s still dating you. What’s your secret?”

Darcy blinked stupidly, surprised at the turn of the conversation. “What?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb,” Ashley said, uncrossing her arms and filling up an empty cup with beer
from a keg. “Johnny Storm doesn’t have girlfriends. He has fuckbuddies.”

“Uhhh…” Darcy stared, not knowing what to say. “Okay.”

“God, Darcy, quit being such an idiot.” Ashley told her, gulping down her beer. “He’s using you,
can’t you see?”

“Using me?” Darcy asked, trying to think of the last time she felt used. Really, she hadn’t ever until
she stepped into this god damned party house.

“For sex, Darcy.” Ashley confirmed, pouring herself another beer that Darcy was sure she didn’t
need. “That’s all he wants from you.”

Darcy smirked, filling up another cup of water and cautiously making baby steps towards Ashley.
“Okay, well, we haven’t really gotten there yet, but when we do…let the using begin.”

This seemed to shock her old friend and Darcy took the opportunity to exchange the beer in her
hand for water. “You haven’t?” she asked, sounding a little like she was going to cry. “At all?”

Darcy shook her head, “I mean, he went down on me a couple times, but—“

Ashley choked on a round of tears Darcy knew were coming. “He did oral?”

“Yeah.” Darcy confirmed as Ashley fell forwards to sob into her cleavage. It was wet and snotty
and Darcy wondered if boobs could get mascara stains. Consolingly, she patted the back of
Ashley’s head.

“He never gave me oral sex.” She blubbered in response, adding some lipstick to the mess on
Darcy’s chest.

“There, there. Cry into my bosom.” Darcy comforted, patting her hair again. “He’s not that great at
it anyways.”

She hiccupped and sobbed through a laugh, coming up from air. “I miss you and Grace…You
guys…were…my best friends.” She sniffed, “Even if you never could hang out…and Grace only
goes second-hand shopping.”

“We can be friends again.” Darcy assured, “You can go make nice with Grace right now. She’s
getting stoned in your basement.”

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goes second-hand shopping.”

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getting stoned in your basement.”

“Okay.” Ashley said quietly, rubbing her nose on the back of her hand. Darcy thought it was kind
of cute. “And Darcy…I’m sorry for what I said about you and Johnny. He seems to really like
you.”

Darcy grimaced, thinking about her boyfriend in the living room, showing her off to his friends. “I
guess so.”
Ashley hesitated a moment before taking her hand, “I mean it. I dated him, at least I thought it was dating, for a while last year. Be careful, alright? Don’t let him hurt you. He could just be waiting to despoil innocent little Darcy.”

“Hey!” Darcy protested, putting her hands on her hips. “I am not innocent little anything!”

Ashley rolled her eyes, reaching behind her to grab a napkin and a cup of water. She began daubing the makeup stains off Darcy’s breasts. “You are to most people. He could just want to take your virginity and move on. I’m not saying that it’s the case, but given Johnny’s track record…”

Darcy frowned, considering that. “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like that’s what’s happening.”

“Then it’s probably not.” Ashley assured, setting down the cup. “I’m going to go find Grace.”

After she left, Darcy slumped on the counter and emitted a long, loud groan. Since when were Asgardian politics easier than mortal relationships?

Getting her shit together, Darcy found the will to leave the kitchen and go find Johnny. Or maybe she could go join the stoners in the basement. That could be fun, right?

She pushed through a crowd of people, making her way to the basement door. She coughed a bit, thinking that no amount of organic incense in the world could defeat that smell.

On second thought, maybe she wouldn’t go down there.

Maybe she could go sit on the porch and review her statement for this evening. Maybe she could think of something to say to Loki to make him go to the damn meeting. Maybe she could think about what she could possibly do to make Loki talk to her again. Slapping him in the face might work. Hitting him really hard on the mouth…with her face…specifically her lips...

“Fresh air it is.” Darcy told herself, slowly making her way outside. Sitting down, cross legged on the front porch, she began reciting her statement through for the thousandth time in a hushed tone:

“Congressed High Lords and Ladies of Asgard, I am Advisor Darcy to Prince Loki, here to give his Majesty’s avowal concerning our realm’s position on the impending war with the Vanir.”

She swallowed hard, considering the words of her introduction. How many speeches had she made? How many times had she stood in for Loki or said something in his name? She hadn’t spoken with him in forever; she had no idea which side he favored or if he even cared about their realm.

Their realm.

Had she really just thought that? She was a mortal. Midgard was her home, was it not? She was born there, her parents lived there…

But she couldn’t lie to herself. Midgard wasn’t her home and neither was Asgard. Loki was. And he was being a royal jackass by making her this homesick.

Sniffing against the chill of the night, Darcy continued her statement:

“Prince Loki Odinson believes…” the wind picked up and the frigid air threw her off track. “In abandoning adorable mortals and not cuddling them when they need it most.” She sighed angrily, scrubbing her face with her hands. “Fuck it.”
She didn’t need to be at this party. Why the fuck was she in a relationship anyways? Asgard needed her. Loki needed her, even if he didn’t want her. She barely had enough time for friendships as it was and she didn’t need a boyfriend who used her for all the sex they weren’t having.

Getting to her feet, Darcy opened the door to reveal one of Johnny’s friends from earlier. She couldn’t remember his name, and the look on his face told her she didn’t want to. “Hey, Johnny’s girl. You’re looking good tonight.”

Darcy clenched her jaw, forcing her hands not to shake as she thought back to Taneleer Tivan and his torture. If she could survive intergalactic shock treatment, she could handle some boy’s preconceived sexist notions about her and Johnny.

“I know.” She told him sassily.

“Hey, I didn’t ask for talk, girl. I only said you looked good.” He said, having enough nerve to sound defensive. “You should say thank you. And smile while you’re at it.” He moved in closer, closing the door with one hand while the other reached up to push a lock of hair behind her ear. “You’d look a lot prettier if you smiled.”

Darcy wished she had Tivan’s super-taser so she could make this asshole do a dirt dance. Instead she pushed him away with more force than he was expecting from a girl Darcy’s size. “Hands to yourself, fuckwad. I’ve got bigger fish to fry than dicks like you.”

His back hit the wall and Darcy didn’t stop to register his reaction. She was going to find Grace and then she was making Johnny drive her home. Johnny’s friend obviously had a different plan as he grumbled some shit about how she was going to pay for that, blah blah blah. She kept walking until that idiot mustered up the audacity to grab her arm. Hard. It hurt. He tugged her backwards and Darcy reacted.

For the record, Darcy might not be able to beat Sif one out of seventy-seven times, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t throw a punch. Her dad was a firefighter and her best friend was the Prince of Asgard. She could throw a fucking punch. And Sir Grabby-Hands got a nice big taste of a good ol’ knuckle-sandwich, straight from the Darcy Lewis shop of damn good hits.

“Oh fuck! My nose!”

Darcy felt bad, but not that bad. Based on the brand of his shoes and the keys to a very expensive sports car linked to his belt-loop, his parents had enough money to pay for the hospital fee.

“You’re a crazy bitch!”

“Hey,” Darcy argued, glaring down at the fallen boy. “Listen here, you douche canoe. I am not a crazy bitch. I am a very busy bitch with a lot of fucking shit to do. Like, so much! You don’t even understand how much work I have to do! Sometimes, even I don’t understand it. But believe me when I say that I understand enough to know that I don’t have time to care about your opinion of my face with a smile on it or not! And don’t touch people like that…it’s creepy…and weird. Don’t be creepy and weird.”

Pleased with her statement, Darcy turned on her heel, running face first into her stunned boyfriend. Johnny’s mouth was gaping wide open and his eyes basically screamed ‘what the fuck, Darce’.

She really couldn’t care less.

“I’m getting Grace and then I’m going home.” She told him firmly.
“I’ll come with you.” Johnny agreed quickly, following Darcy as she pushed her way to the stairs, muttering bitterly under her breath all the way. It was only when they reached the basement did she desist, for her train of thought was blown away almost entirely by the sight before her.

Darcy should have known that thirty minutes at a party was long enough for Grace to get into some kind of trouble. She just didn’t expect it to be quite so drastic.

Grace was standing in the center of the room, her arms stretched out in front of her, eyes closed as she felt around the air in front of her. The basement stoners and several other inebriates had gathered round her, hanging onto every word she was saying. At her feet were stacks upon stacks of red solo cups. Ashley was at her side, completely wasted.

“I am channeling the gods. I am the conduit of their word, their mortal concubine, their prophet! And I need all of these cups…” she trailed off, her eyes shooting open as she gazed onto the crowded. “Because cups…should be reused and recycled. Fuck all of your plastic fucking bags…The gods say…” she quieted, head lolling off to the side, “That they hate red-solo cups! And my Queen and I,” she wrapped an arm around Ashley’s shoulders, “Will birth new soil! But first one of has got to fuck someone, because I…have never wanted sex more in my life!”

Johnny was choking back laughter and Darcy had to force herself to keep a straight face. Oh God, Sam was going to kill her.

“Shrooms.” Johnny explained. “Either that or LSD, but Ashley has a rule—“

“I know the rule.” Darcy interrupted, stepping over the wall of red-solo cups to wrap an arm around her friend. “C’mon, Grace.”

“Darcy,” Grace said with a dopey smile, “We should stay.”

“We should go. Psychedelics really aren’t your thing.” Darcy said and Grace pouted.

“You don’t understand, Darce, I am the chosen one. And you are the chosen one. And your hot boyfriend is the chosen one. And your other hot boyfriend is the chosen one.” Grace slurred, reaching down to pick up and armful of red solo cups. “We are all the chosen ones! We can save this planet together!”

Everyone cheered and Ashley leaned on Grace’s shoulder, “Won’t your mom be worried, Grace? Curfew and all that?”

Grace raised a red solo cup and smiled, “The chosen one does not suffer consequence!”

Darcy sighed and turned to her tall, muscular boyfriend. “Johnny, can you…”

“On it, babe.” He said, immediately picking Grace up bridal style, red solo cups and all. He grunted a little bit, as she wiggled to keep hold of her plastic nemeses. “She is heavier than she looks.”

Darcy led them out to the car while Grace went on about the economic implications of manufacturing red-solo cups and even cried at one point about landfills. By the time they were on the road, Grace was lying in her pile of plastic cups in Johnny’s backseat, blabbering about whatever came into her head.

Meanwhile, Darcy and Johnny’s conversation was at level zero, just because Darcy had so much going on in her head. There was a heavy weight in her chest, bearing down on her sanity. She really just wanted someone to hold her and tell her everything would be okay. She felt starved of non-
sexual physical contact.

“Darcy,” Grace called from the backseat, “Bring me a man.”

Johnny chuckled and Darcy smiled just a teensy bit, “Go find your own man, Grace.”

“Grace, how much did you take?” Johnny asked, looking at her in his rearview mirror.

“Some.” Grace answered tiredly, “Darcy, why can’t you call Loki? He would totally have sex with me, right? He’s hot. And he’s got great cheekbones. And remember that time, I went over to your house that morning and he was in your bed? How do your parents not know about that?”

“Oh fuck me running.” Darcy muttered as Johnny’s face fell and Grace giggled, continuing to talk on.

Her now slightly perturbed looking boyfriend opened his mouth to speak and Darcy shook her head. “Loki is a friend of mine. Just a friend.”

“If he’s just a friend then why did Grace find him in your bed?” Johnny asked angrily and Darcy had the urge to laugh. Out of everything that could have made Darcy and Loki more than friends, sharing a bed was the last thing Darcy would consider and indicator.

Thankfully, Grace spoke up from the backseat, “No, Johnny Boy, don’t be mad. That was a year ago. And we were all sure Darcy was gay until she started dating you. She was with this college babe over the summer.”

“Thank you, Grace Wilson, for your commentary on my sex life this evening, would you care to shut your baked ass up?” Darcy snapped and Grace giggled like a mad woman, sinking down into her cups.

Johnny looked considerably more relaxed, but still on edge. “Darcy…you…what? You’re gay?”

Darcy kneaded her brow exasperatedly, “No. No, I’m not. Johnny—”

“But you’ve been with a girl?”

“Duh.” Grace said from the backseat.

Darcy’s heart was racing and she couldn’t quite figure out why. Her insides seemed to quiver with gut wrenching apprehension. She wanted Loki. Not the sorry, lost Loki that ignored her. She wanted her Loki.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Johnny asked, sounding in what Darcy could only decipher as offense.

She frowned, the beginning of madness stirring under her stress. “You always talk about your past relationships.”

“When did this become about me?”

“Since you decided that you ought to know who I’ve been with.”

“I just thought we were open with each other, Darce! I thought we were honest!”

Darcy choked on something that may or may not have been guilt. It wasn’t like she could tell Johnny about Asgard or Loki without giving away a good half of her life. Swallowing potential
tears, Darcy batted the guilt away.

“Honesty doesn’t have anything to do with you knowing who I’ve been with!” she argued.

“Bullshit! Are you hiding something? I tell you everything, Darcy!”

She groaned, crossing her arms. “Yeah, Johnny. I know you fucking tell me everything. I have to hear about almost every girl you’ve ever even thought about sticking your dick in. So, you’ll pardon me if I don’t care to return the favor.”

Johnny snorted incredulously, “Oh. Come on, Darcy. You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It doesn’t matter to me how you meant it.” Darcy said slumping against the door in defeat. “And the only thing I’m hiding is how bad a wedgie I have right now and I’m doing a damn fine job at it.”

Grace cackled from the backseat as Johnny parked in the Wilson’s driveway. Once he parked, Darcy opened the car door to help her friend out. Grace stumbled, dropping her red-solo cups when she tried to carry an arm-full to the front door.

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Johnny watched Sam Wilson answer the door and give his sister and Darcy a disapproving look. Grace offered him a red solo cup sadly and Sam smirked, wrapping an arm around his sister while Darcy explained, her hands flying everywhere as she spoke.

Shaking his head, Johnny reached inside his pocket for a cigarette. He didn’t smoke often and almost never around Darcy, but tonight was rough.

How the fuck could he have messed things up with Darcy? Johnny Storm was convinced this girl was the best thing to ever happen to him. She was smarter, hotter, and funnier than anyone ever gave her credit for.

One might think that by second semester of his senior year of high school, guys would realize that there’s more to a girl than the size of her tits. But they hadn’t. They teased Johnny about how he was fucking Darcy Lewis; that quirky junior with the sweater puppies.

Johnny remembered a time when he was exactly like them, and something told him he would still be like them if not for Darcy. She was so different from everyone else he was used to hanging out with.

Not in the sense that she dressed different, or that she looked different. She was average in both regards if you set aside her breath-taking good looks. But she was sassy and Johnny was beginning to believe she was a genius to some extent.

It was hard to notice at first how much was actually going on inside Darcy’s mind. She didn’t brag about all that she could do or even what she was always so busy with. She was so smart and in the four months they’d been dating, Johnny had only seen a portion of it.

He knew she spoke fluent Spanish and French, but she’d only taken a couple years of each class. She had no trouble with any kind of math, but she always hurried to finish her homework right before the bell rang.

Those were the obvious things, but then there were other actions that were just uniquely Darcy.
Like her confidence. She didn’t flaunt anything because she didn’t need to. He couldn’t describe it. He couldn’t tell if her self-assurance spurred from her body or her intelligence, but Darcy was very comfortable with being...well...Darcy. She always seemed to know what she was doing.

It showed in their recent argument. Everything he said she took as just another thing to deal with in the busy life of Darcy Lewis.

It made him mad. Not in the sense that she was always busy or that he didn’t know what it was, but rather that she didn’t tell him. She didn’t think something as important as her only relationship had been with a woman or that she let her male friend sleep in her bed.

Maybe those things weren’t so important. Maybe Johnny was just overreacting. He’d made a mistake taking her to Ashley’s party. Honestly, Johnny was a bit bored of the high school party scene. Someone’s older brother gives them a keg, someone else gets their hands on enough weed to call it a party. Johnny was ready for the real deal. He didn’t want to take Darcy to a party because he necessarily enjoyed them.

The true reason he wanted to take her is something he ought to be ashamed of.

To put it bluntly, he wanted his friends to see Darcy as a super sexy girl that didn’t deserve their teasing. It wasn’t like they made fun of her. More or less they just teased Johnny over having a thing for nerds. But Darcy wasn’t a nerd at all....

Okay, she was a bit of a nerd. But he liked that part of her just as much as he liked the other parts of her. She had come to mean so much to him and all his friends could see was some chick with glasses and a nice rack. The only way she would ever mean more to them is if she was dressed up and put on display. Johnny knew how their minds worked, he used to be like them, he would still be like them if not for Darcy.

So that’s what he did. And what does Darcy do? She punches someone in the nose. He didn’t know whether to be proud or worried. Maybe both.

Fuck. Since when does Johnny Storm question himself in a relationship?

Since Darcy Fucking Lewis, that’s when.

At first, Johnny only wanted to date her for the T&A. Who could blame him, really? He offered, almost jokingly, and she declined in the same humor.

After hanging out with her, joking around in Physics, catching up with her on her way to class, Johnny felt like he could totally take her on a date first.

As time went on, Johnny considered two dates, meeting her parents, and then having the best fuck of his life.

Now he was questioning whether or not he could actually have sex with Darcy.

Don’t get him wrong, he wanted to. He really, really wanted to. But he was convinced that having sex with Darcy would majorly fuck up their relationship.

What if they did it and Darcy started thinking the only thing he wanted from her was sex? What if they did it and she didn’t like it? Would she revert to being gay? Would she look different if she was gay? Is that how that worked? Maybe they could solve it with a threesome. But what if the threesome made Darcy think that Johnny liked that other girl more than he liked her? What if the threesome turned her gay again? They couldn’t do a threesome.
What was he talking about? They hadn’t even had sex.

Well, they had oral. That had been a lot of fun. Darcy had some serious DSLs. Thank every deity ever for Darcy’s mouth. And her tits.

And the rest of her. Because as great as all those things were about her, it was still mostly the fact that Darcy was the one giving him head that made the experience so magical.

Bitterly, he took a long draw from his cigarette. Sam Wilson looked to Johnny briefly then back at Darcy with concern. Johnny snorted. He wasn’t that bad. His reputation made him sound a lot worse than he already was. He never got anyone pregnant and the only time he’d ever fucked anyone under the bleachers was in his Freshman year. And it was a mistake. Kinda.

Darcy made a face, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, saying something Johnny couldn’t quite hear. Sam looked slightly taken back and Johnny wondered if she had defended him. Would she do that? Even after they fought?

Sam helped Grace inside and Darcy made her way back to his truck. She slipped inside, immediately turning up the heat. Johnny took off his jacket and offered it to her. She took it and looked at him with those big blue eyes that threatened to tear him to pieces. Her gaze landed on his smoke and her expression softened immensely.

“It’s okay, Johnny. I’m not mad.” She said, putting on his jacket. He liked the way it looked on her. “Pissed off, maybe. But not mad.”

He exhaled, a gust of smoke billowing from his mouth. “I’m sorry, Darce. About tonight and about the girls, I didn’t know it bothered you. I won’t do it anymore. I just…”

“C’mon, Johnny. I’m sorry. I was being a bit of an ass before. Over the summer, I was with a girl named Sharon. It wasn’t very serious. We went skinny dipping once. Loki has been my best friend forever. He was in a rough spot with his dad so I let him sleep in my bed.” She said, taking the cigarette from between his fingers and flicking it out the window. “You only do that when you’re stressed. It’s fine. We should talk about the party though.”

He huffed, thinking over what she told him. Maybe they both were being a bitchy. Maybe it was better to talk about it. A dull ache in his chest reminded him of why he liked Darcy so much. She knew things about him; she cared about him. She wasn’t like his dad who, even as a doctor, liked to spend his evenings gambling. Or Sue who was always too busy to notice anything her baby brother did besides fuck half the school. They used to pay him some mind, but they stopped after his mom died. After that, they didn’t really know anything that went on in his life.

But Darcy knew. She knew he smoked when he was stressed and that his aspiration to be an Astronaut was more than just a childhood dream.

“Darce?”

“Yeah?” she replied, zipping up his coat.

He shifted in his seat to face her, “Can we go someplace? Not a party, just me and you. I want to show you someplace. We can talk there.”

Darcy nodded, angling the heat vents to blow on her legs. “Yeah. That’s cool. As long as I’m home before midnight.”

Johnny started the car and reversed out of Grace’s driveway.
It didn’t take long to get to where he wanted to go. Just a few turns and a trip down a familiar dirt road. He stopped near a riverside, the moon reflecting off the water surface, an old dock extending off the shore.

Darcy took in the landscape. “Nice. We setting the scene for something?”

Johnny chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. “No. I just wanted to say I’m sorry for how my friends treated you.”

He didn’t know what to expect. Maybe that she would accept his apology and they could put this behind them.

Only, that didn’t happen. Her eyebrows came together and she focused on the rippling current of the river at night. “I don’t want you to apologize for your friends.”

He waited anxiously, really wishing she’d just say what he did wrong so he could fix it.

“Why did you want me to go to this party, Johnny?” Darcy asked, looking over to him. “Don’t bullshit me, either. You know they’re not really my scene and I know that you’re bored of them nowadays.”

Johnny let his head fall back against the seat. Chances were, Darcy already knew why he wanted her to go to the party, she just needed confirmation. “I wanted them to see you as…I don’t know…more, I guess.” He looked at her hurt expression and hurried to correct himself. “Not that I think you need to be more. Darcy I see you as…everything. You’re, like, the Angelina Jolie to my Brad Pitt.”

“Oh baby,” she said with a sarcastic pout, “You left Jennifer Anniston for me? How sweet.”

He tried not to laugh at that. “Okay, dumb analogy. We’d have way more children anyways. But, Darcy, the things they say about you…it’s awful. It’s like…everything you do, all those funny things you say or the way you talk…they don’t see you as the kind of person I do. To them, you might be smart, but the only value you have to them is T&A.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows and nodded like this wasn’t a surprise or some kind of revelation to her. “I think the term you’re looking for is ‘sexism’ and I’m here to tell you that I have seen it many times.”

“Darcy—“

She opened her car door, “Come on, Johnny. Let me show you something.”

Verging on shock, Johnny got out of the car, following his girlfriend to the shoreline where there was a view of the night sky shining down on them. She took his hand in hers, linking their fingers as she pointed to the sky. “Do you see that?”

“See what?” Johnny asked, following her finger to the stars.

“The stars.” She said with a sigh, “They’re so close when you look at how big the universe is, you know? Because the universe is a big fucking place.”

“Okay,” Johnny agreed hesitantly, “What about it?”

She smirked, turning to him, the moonlight making her hair shine. “I’ve got a lot of fucking things to deal with in this world plus some, Johnny Storm. I could care less about what a group of sexist
boys think about me.”

Johnny frowned. “I know you don’t care, but I do, Darcy. They shouldn’t see you like that! They should…”

“They should see every person equally. They should see every girl for who she is and every boy for who he is. They should stop wasting their money on red-solo cups and invest in elephant poop ones. They should stop smoking, get rid of their guns and become pacifists doing humanitarian work in Uganda.” Darcy said, squeezing his hand tightly, urging him to hear her words. “It isn’t just those boys that think that way. It’s a large part of the way people live and there are ways to stop it. But dressing me up and taking me out as your sexy fuck-puppet isn’t going to do anything for them or society. Especially since we aren’t actually fucking.”

Johnny’s heart thudded almost uncomfortably as he nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“All is forgiven.” She said, stepping in closer to wrap her arms around his shoulders, angling her face so their noses touch. “I like you, Johnny Storm. But don’t do it again.”

They kissed and Johnny felt like he melted into her. She forgave him? She didn’t slap him or yell at him or break up with him. He felt that this was how relationships were supposed to go. That they should just…talk. He felt lucky…no, honored, to be kissing her. Maybe a god somewhere messed up and that’s why Darcy was even bothering with him. She saw past his friends’ icky facades, which meant she could see past his. If that was so, if she could see past his looks and flirtiness, what did he have that she liked?

The kiss ended and Johnny Storm wrapped his arms around her, “Fuck, Darcy, I—“

He cut himself off, unbelieving of what he’d almost said. The “L” word. He wouldn’t do that, would he? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Yeah?” she asked, standing on her toes to kiss him again. Her lips were soft and warm and her kisses a little wet.

He got lost in them, letting his hands slip down to squeeze her ass and hold her hips closer to his. “Nothing.”

Her tongue flicked against his bottom lip and in return he deepened their kiss for a few seconds when she slipped her hands under the hem of his shirt.

“Darcy,” he said through her kisses, “Are you sure?”

She pulled away, giving him a questioning look. “Yeah. I am. Are you?”

“Yeah.” His answer came immediately and her lips went to his again. After a moment he pulled away. “Okay, maybe not.”

Darcy gave him a look, one eyebrow shooting into her hairline. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.” She said, turning around and getting into his truck.

What the hell was ‘okay’ supposed to mean? Why couldn’t things be simple?

Johnny got in the driver’s side and tried not to feel like he just threw away possibly the best sexual
experience of his life. “Darcy, it’s not you.”

She took off her glasses, rubbing one of the lenses, her tongue poking out as she did so. “I didn’t think it was. I mean, not to insinuate anything, but it was pretty clear little Johnny totally has a thing for me.”

Johnny really couldn’t argue with that and he laughed at her ridiculous phrasing. “That’s true.”

One of her hands held his, “You don’t have to tell me.”

He rolled his eyes, leaning across the gap between them to peck her lips. “It’s really dumb.”

“I don’t doubt it.” She teased, “Let your seat back.”

Johnny did as she said, distancing himself from the steering wheel, allowing space for Darcy to straddle his lap. As sexy as it was, Darcy somehow made it…less so. It was more comforting than anything.

Clearing his throat, he nodded to the river. “My dad used to take me fishing here as a kid, before, well…”

Darcy waited, her hands on either of his shoulders, her wide, inquisitive eyes set on his.

“Before my mom died. After that he’s been…” Johnny trailed off, thinking of the right word. “Despondent.” He sighed, letting his head fall against her chest. It felt safe to do so. “I like to come here sometimes.”

“Shit, Johnny.” Darcy sighed, lightly scraping her fingers against his scalp. “I came onto you in your nostalgia-hideout.”

He chuckled, not lifting his head. Not yet.

She settled her cheek atop his head. “You don’t talk much about your parents.”

“I don’t really want to start either.” He said, tone peppered with slight aggression. There was no way he was getting into that shit.

“Chill,” she said, leaning on her heels to kiss his lips. “You don’t have to. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Johnny Storm, but I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to.”

He cocked a brow, “My television remote and hours I’ve spent watching South Park with no pretzels because you refused to share tells me otherwise.”

She grinned, ear to ear, “Those things don’t count.”

“You made me eat tofu that one time.”

Darcy scoffed, “You can’t go your whole life without at least trying tofu.”

Not smiling would have been impossible if he ever decided he wanted to stop. They kissed, over and over again, the windows of the car fogging up as their breaths came quicker and Johnny struggled to keep his hips planted to the seat. He found himself needing to touch her, trailing his fingers up her legs, squeezing the backs of her thighs.

Finally they broke apart, Darcy touching her forehead to his. “Johnny, if we’re not having sex in here, you’ve gotta stop that.”
Johnny felt as though he deserved some otherworldly prize for turning on Darcy Lewis. He wanted to continue. He wanted to give this girl everything. But he had a few reasons why right now would be a bad idea.

“Darce, you have no idea how bad I want to fuck you right now.” Johnny said, wondering if it was unhealthy for one’s balls to be this blue.

She pursed her lips, rocking her hips against the bulge in his pants. “You know, I’m not a scientist most of the time, but that might give me a pretty good idea.”

“Ha ha,” he said, reaching between them to make some adjustments. “There are actually a few good reasons why this isn’t the best plan.”

“I can think of a few, but let’s hear yours first.” Darcy said, bending her neck to press light kisses to his throat.

“Well, first of all,” Johnny said, moving his hands to cup her ass. As long as he was suffering, he might as well do it with a handful of ass. “The only condom I have is the one in my wallet and I literally haven’t changed it in three months. It might be expired. Also, my back pocked it not room temperature. It’s ass temperature. Two entirely different things. Under normal circumstances, I’d say ‘just the tip’ but I think I’d cry if that happened. It’s all or nothing at this point.”

“Hmm,” Darcy said, sucking hard on his pulse. “I have an IUD.”

Johnny froze, looking up at her. “What?”

“Hormones are a bitch,” she explained, “I was on the pill, but taking them made my boobs hurt. I got a non-hormonal IUD instead.”

“No shit.” Johnny said as she moved to the other side of his neck. “Okay. I have another reason.”

“Lay it on me.”

Johnny swallowed, trying not to lose it in his pants. He hadn’t done it yet, he wasn’t about to. “You’re a virgin.”

Darcy pulled away, giving him a look. “I’m not a virgin.”

“You’re not a vagina-virgin. You’re a dick-virgin.” Johnny told her factually as she snorted in disbelief.

“What kind of reasoning is that?”

“The kind that says how lesbian sex doesn’t involve a penis. It’s different.” Johnny said knowledgably.

Darcy crossed her arms, “I bet you have lots of experience with lesbian sex.”

“What can I say?” Johnny said, “Pornography has taught me many things.”

“I’m starting to think sex with you may not be as fantastic as I believed it would be.” Darcy questioned in what he hoped was a joking tone.

Johnny held up his hands in defense, “Hey, let’s not be hasty. I’m just saying that it’s your first time with a guy. And it would be our first time together. It should be, like, I don’t know, special or some shit.”
Darcy smiled, ruffling his hair, “Aw, does Johnny want our first time to be special?”

He grabbed her hand, biting her palm gently. “Yeah, Lewis, he does. We should have dinner first.”

“Or I could be dinner.” Darcy suggested airily, “Just saying.”

“You’re desert, babe.” He countered.

Darcy seemed to consider this for a moment. “Will there be candles?”

“Absolutely.”

She let out a gust of air through puffed cheeks. “Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

Johnny applauded his own restraint by not busting a nut in his pants as she wiggled out of his lap. “Something tells me my way isn’t happening tonight?”

Darcy nodded and Johnny tried not to be disappointed. “It’ll have to be a surprise. Take me home, Hot Stuff. I’ve got shit to do tonight that isn’t you, unfortunately.”

Johnny stuck the key into his truck’s ignition attempting to mentally force the blood back into his brain. “It’s a damn shame.”

“I’ll say. I much prefer your dick to the assholes I’ve got to deal with tonight.” Darcy said, propping her bare feet up on the dash.

“Who are you seeing tonight?” Johnny asked, shocked that she mentioned anything about her evening plans. Usually, he couldn’t get anything out of her.

She gave him a sideways glance. “I’m standing in for one of two princes of a space kingdom because I’m his advisor. Tonight I will be abstaining his vote for him. I will also be trying to convince his brother, the Crowned Prince, fighting two sides of a realm, beating them into bloody submission is a terrible idea. All the while, the princes’ father, the king, is going to stare at me with his one eye like I am personally responsible for anything bad that ever happened.” She said pausing to breathe.

“And then,” she held up a finger, talking to the windshield rather than him, “On my way out, some guy with a Weird Beard is going to look at me like death is afoot in my near future. Later, I will go speak with the Queen of said space kingdom, and she will give me lessons on how to help her lead an underground spy program in her realm.”

Johnny cleared his throat, turning on the car engine. “Okay, I get it. You don’t want to tell me. Your story isn’t even remotely believable. Any prince would have made you his princess by now.”

She sighed exasperatedly, “One might think. But that’s a whole other realm I’m not even prepared to set foot in. Onward.”

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Loki wasn’t sure how much longer he could take it.

His search for infinity stones had become a hunt. It was life or death, and those ridiculous stones… they were the balm to his wounded flesh, marred and scarred by his continuous failures.

There were several things Loki wanted to accomplish and he feared that he only had so long to do them. His life no longer felt as though it would go on forever if he only gave Idunn the word. He no
longer felt like he had time to spare. He had an indefinite amount of his life remaining, for he had discovered that his sanity and soul were linked by a lifeline to a mortal girl.

No physical line existed, no magical connection. What he felt was disgustingly sentimental and purely of heart. But he would curse himself to Hel if the pain wasn’t as terrible.

Numerous things were keeping him from Darcy, even as her friend.

Atop the list were the Infinity Stones and the damned Celestial, may it rest in the darkest pits of Nilfheim for eternity.

The map was no longer a great enigma for Loki; he knew it well enough by now to understand that not much more could come of it. And because his magic had begun to manifest at a much quicker pace, he decided he would seek them on his own.

Danger was something Loki was becoming more familiar with.

While he and Darcy faced threats head on, as most Asgardians did, he quickly found that he must trade tactics. He could not simply walk into any place as a prince, declare its occupants his subjects and request a rare and powerful item. He was the God of Mischief, Chaos, and Lies. It was his calling to get things his way and on his own terms. He need only exercise the proper means.

He wasn’t sleeping. No matter how much he tried, his bed, nor his desk, nor any chair, floor or pillow felt like Darcy’s bed and no memory could fill the absence of her friendship. He was alone. By choice, yes, but alone nonetheless. Due to this, he used his nights for his journeys.

Being a prince, he knew the existence of several inter-realm treasures. He knew the light elves prided themselves on soul magic and the dwarves built temples for worshiping different rocks in honor of the gods. Covered by the darkness of night, he would locate the treasures of the Nine Realms, seek out lost jewels and precious items.

He uncovered legends, dug up tombs, risked his life for dust and rocks and still wasn’t any closer to doing what the Celestial prophecy claimed.

Well, at least the part that involved capturing all of the Infinity Stones. As for the end, Loki could not disagree.

“A shadow.” He said to himself, watching Jörmungandr slither around the bookshelves, happily looking on the inside of every cover. “The insignificant.”

Loki scrubbed a hand over his face, slamming his book shut. It was a collection of Elven tales about mystic trees and wicked water spirits. He was chasing stories; seeking out myths and legends that didn’t exist. It was dangerous.

He couldn’t tell Darcy of what he was doing; she would disapprove and worry over him. He did not wish for Darcy to have any more concern for him than she had in the past. The oncoming war with Vanheim was taking up a great portion of her time. She need not waste her energy on him as well.

The other reason Loki distanced himself from Darcy Lewis had to do with his feelings for her.

He loved her more dearly and more uniquely than he had loved anyone before. She was worth everything to him.

But she was being romanced by that Idiot Boy, Johnny Storm.
Some short time ago, Loki waited in Darcy’s room, prepared to bring her to Asgard. She said she would be home at eight.

An hour later, after she had not arrived, Loki was on edge, prepared to go after her. Darcy was hardly ever late. Her absence shook him to his core, threatening to wean out even the tiniest sliver of hope.

It was strange how one too many near death experiences could lead him to fretting over her absence like an ill mother hen. He assured himself that she was most likely passing the time with Idiot Boy and had entirely forgotten about Asgard for the time being.

Comfortable in this thought, he magicked himself to the Storm Household. Darcy’s mother’s car sat in the driveway and Darcy stood inside with Johnny Storm while he struggled over a ridiculous declaration of his feelings for her. Perhaps Loki was all too satisfied when Darcy did not notice the weight of Idiot Boy’s words. Perhaps she did not reciprocate.

It made Loki angry, even so. Angry and powerless to do anything about it. Johnny Storm did not deserve Darcy’s love. He didn’t know her; he didn’t know the extent of her abilities. That Idiot Boy didn’t know the first thing about Darcy’s mind or how she looked when she cried, he didn’t know about what her hair looked like when she woke up or that little noise she made when he appeared out of nowhere to make her jump. Loki doubted that the Idiot Boy even knew what Darcy looked like without her make-up.

And yet, despite his stupidity on all things Darcy Lewis related, the Idiot Boy was already falling in love with her.

Loki felt as if there should be some law, some force of nature that prevented such a thing from happening.

However, Johnny Storm made Darcy happy, and he could not ever deny Darcy happiness of any brand. Not that he had any say in whether or not Darcy courted the Idiot Boy anyhow.

Loki sighed, leaning back in his chair. He couldn’t put her in danger again. And with the responsibility of the universe in his hands, how could he truly keep her safe when she was so close to him?

He had lived his life as a prince, studying the sacrifices he would make as a king and the things he must do for his realm. It wasn’t until after he met Darcy and ventured the expanse of Yggdrasil that he decided he truly did not want the throne. Why would he want the weight of Asgard’s problems when he could spend eternity learning and practicing magic, uncovering undiscovered secrets of the universe with Darcy at his side?

The Celestial reminded him why.

He was capable. Loki had the ability to collect the Infinity Stones. He knew enough about them and was powerful enough to handle them without setting the known universe to ruin.

But it was not just his magical strengths that Loki believed led him to his current position. It was his understanding of sacrifice; theoretically, he understood the cost of power.

Unlike many, Loki had years to learn the art of ruling. Millennia passed, his childhood years devoted purely to being the best that he could be, trying to equate to Thor’s mightiness with his mind. Loki didn’t learn how to rule, to be King of Asgard, to do right by his people. He didn’t do it for them or even the sake of the Nine Realms. He did it so that everyone might think he was just
as good as his brother. He did it to earn respect when he had no other means to.

And always he was Thor’s shadow.

Loki had never been willing to fully commit to his position. He always had hope that his insignificance on Asgard would free him and he would no longer be needed in the court. He and Darcy could always retire to Midgard or travel from realm to realm. She could become an ambassador of sorts for Earth after a few hundred years. She made sure he was not a shadow. She was his light, casting away all darkness.

Loki wasn’t Thor’s shadow with Darcy. He was himself. And since she had entered his life, Loki had almost forgotten about his loneliness. He forgot what it was like to spend days alone, hardly speaking to anyone. His world was silent without her voice or her music or her soft snores. But their trip outside of Yggdrasil had brought to light how very dangerous the stones were.

The Celestial handing the Power Stone over to him had summoned a deadly assassin, willing to kill him to obtain it.

Mention of the stones were enough to bring torture upon Darcy.

According to the Celestial, it was his destiny, his fate and future to find the Infinity Stones.

Yet, it was no mere prophecy that urged him with such ferocity to find them.

It was Darcy.

She was too smart for her own good. She’d made her mark around the Nine Realms. More people knew her as Advisor Darcy than they did as Darcy Lewis. Her face and name were associated with him and he had no shortage of enemies as of late. Neither the Nine Realms nor the Galaxy were safe for her. With all the love he had for that insistent, bold little mortal, he could not allow her to live in a place where people were willing to kill for powerful rocks.

They had been so careless before, sure that so few knew about the Infinity Stones that none would recognize their attempts to seek them out. Darcy was a target to anyone with enough sense to notice the extent of their escapades.

He must locate the Infinity Stones. For Darcy.

Jörmungandr had ceased his browsing and had come to curl himself around Loki’s shoulders. He’d even begun spending less time with his animal friends. Jörmungandr had not gone unharmed in the Galaxy and Fenrir seemed, in part, emotionally traumatized by the event. He’d gotten quieter. Loki did not wish to lose his other companions, choosing to go on his Infinity Stone quests alone.

He had another trip planned that night. The Elven legends claimed there was a tree in the Dark Wood, the cold, dark and desolate quarter of Alfheim where only the creatures bred there could see. Any fool that stepped foot inside was considered dead.

Loki couldn’t keep track of the number of times he’d almost died in the past few months and he could hardly be bothered to care. He felt hardened against death. How terrible could it truly be? Whether it be the light of the Valkyries to welcome him away from this world or the dark pits of Hel, surely death could not be worse than his current state.

But he wouldn’t see Darcy again if he died. At least not for a very long time. Whatever life he was in he would find her, but that could take an eternity.
He wondered if he should go see her now. No doubt she was finishing up a late night meeting, trudging back to her rooms with her exhausted eyes and tired mouth. He imagined a time when they would have been searching for one another, and when they’d found each other, Loki would hold her hand, Darcy would lean into his side as his magical presence washed over her.

Going to her now would be a mistake. Reconnecting with her as he was would earn him a fight. It was impossible that Darcy would accept his decision to keep her out of his search, especially without her knowing. She would tell him it was stupid and that she loved him. She would be angry, but eventually she might allow his affection. For her, he would have to stop hunting Infinity Stones.

Inhaling deeply, he made up his mind it was time to go and as he stood, someone spoke behind him. “Your Highness.”

Oh gods, he did not need this now. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to will the oncoming threat away, preferring solitude to her sick attempt at charm.

He heard Lorelei take a step closer to him, her presence burning in his mind like a fire. “I have a message from the Allfather.”

Loki grit his teeth, deciding there would be a delay in his plans this evening. He had been adamantly deserting his duties; no doubt the Allfather was irked by his misbehaviors. But why he should send Lorelei after him was a mystery. Jaw clenched and muscles tensed, he turned to her.

Lorelei was a Lady, in every sense of the word. She was beautiful, confident, soft spoken, and entirely invested in being the Crowned Prince’s bride. And in Loki’s childish, raging need to hide his love for Darcy, he claimed Lorelei in a way he wished he never had. Publicly he kissed her in front of his father, mother, brother, several high lords, an ambassador of Vanheim and, of course, Darcy. His intentions had been to make Darcy jealous and Lorelei was a willing channel for his purpose.

In this sightless, stupid action, he had not taken into account that a prince’s favor, however brief, was to improve her status by some degree. If a commoner were to be seen having tea with the Queen, they would not simply be a commoner any longer.

Lorelei was a lady, though her father was still just a Lord, she was bold. She had done a great deal more interacting with people outside of the palace than some. A few of the ladies always made time to go out rather than stroll the halls of the palace all day. They were allowed to, unlike Sigyn whose parents demand she be kept out of harm’s way.

Lorelei was social, she practiced some magic, and she was notorious. Loki could smell mischief on her, though it was not a pleasant scent. From what Darcy told him, she was cleverer than many of the other ladies and she had come close to initiating courtship with Thor before the Allfather declared his engagement to Sigyn. Since then she had been fighting to win over his hand through rising in her unofficial social status.

And what better way to do that then through Thor’s younger brother. He remembered kissing her and wanted to cringe. Her magic was unpracticed and weak, her red hair was a dying fire that left her lips tasting like ash, her eyes sought the golden prince while her heart sought his future title, and her current stance was to stand as a temptress before the shadow.

Her dress was gray, cut to accentuate her thin, athletic form and display her small breasts. Loki met her eyes, simultaneously wishing for her to vanish and to step closer.
She proceeded with the latter and Loki felt his blood thicken, refusing to cycle his body. It hurt. “Lady Lorelei, deliver your message.”

She pouted at his abruptness and took two coy steps towards him. “You seem tense, Loki.”

Her casual use of his name brought anger to his veins, reviving his dying blood. “I am your prince, and I have not granted you permission to address me as you have.”

For a moment, her true emotions shone and Loki was pleased with her fear. Perhaps he was a monster, no better than the Jotunar, to feel that way. “My apologies, Your Highness. Formality abandoned me for the moment. My Prince, in your presence, my sense is all but lost.”

“Formality is your falsehood.” Loki told her quietly as she came close enough that he could smell the soap in her fiery red hair. It masked the scent of smoke only just. “What message do you bring?”

Her smirk was impish, her gait suggestive. She didn’t answer his question. “Advisor Darcy has not been at your attendance as often as she once was. An Advisor ought to be there for her Prince, don’t you think? Although…” she trailed off, raising her hand as if to push a lock of his hair away from his face. “…I suppose we all get bored. Perhaps she has moved on.”

Loki caught her hand before she could touch him, glaring down at her with barely suppressed rage. “Insult my advisor again and I will have you stripped of your name, Lady Lorelei.”

She kept her hand in his, tilting her head to the side to look him curiously up and down. At last, she relented, bowing her head in an apology. “Forgive me, Your Highness. The Allfather summons you to his study.”

Loki grimaced, wondering how long Odin intended to lecture him. With a sigh and a wave of his hand, his reading materials were stowed and he was walking down the aisle, away from Lorelei. He spoke to her as he left. “You’re dismissed.”

What could Odin truly do to him now? Yell? Bang his staff? Threaten to raze Yggdrasil? Marry him off like Thor? Forbid him from leaving the palace for a few seasons?

Several possible punishments ran through Loki’s head and he considered any of which he might actually care about. All options made him angry as he contemplated the consequence of ignoring his father’s summons.

As appealing as running off to the dark Elven forests seemed, avoiding the inevitable was to escape the future.

The Einherjar outside Odin’s study bowed to him, opening the ornate golden doors.

The Allfather himself stood by the window, overlooking the glittering Asgardian sky. Night had captured the city and Loki was terribly aware of how ignorant the sleeping Asgardian citizens were. They knew nothing about the Infinity Stones or evil collectors with painful death wishes. They did not know what it was like to love a mortal.

And neither did Odin.

“Allfather.” Loki said, silently daring his father to look at him. No matter how angry Odin may be, he could not match Loki’s rage.

Odin waited for a moment, his back and golden cape to his youngest son. “You were not at
tonight’s meeting.”

Loki blinked at him innocently, cocking his head to the side, seemingly in thought. “Was I not? I can’t recall…”

The Allfather continued as if Loki hadn’t spoken. “You have been absent from every event, social, political or otherwise in the past season.”

“Did you miss me?” Loki asked wittily, his fists tightening at his sides.

“This evening I called together each of the High Lords and Ladies to gather a consensus as to what they believed Asgard’s course of action should be regarding the war with Vanheim.” Odin said hollowly, turning to the dark haired prince in nothing less than disgust. “You were not there to give your statement. Rather your common, disreputable advisor. A girl with no family, no history, and no title but the one you gave her, stated your abstention from the decision concerning the potential beginning of the next Great War.”

Dismissively, Loki feigned boredom. “I am sure you’ll find Advisor Darcy puts my beliefs to words well enough.”

Odin gave a short, humorless, laugh. “Oh? You think so? That girl who talks like the world is her companion? You have her taking your responsibilities as a Prince of Asgard! And I dare say she is doing a better job!”

Loki ground his teeth, his bitter sardonic tone increasing with Odin’s insult to his friend. “Have I? Perhaps you are right. She ought to be a princess.”

Gungnir bashed against the ground and Loki tasted energy radiating from him. “Be serious, boy! This goes beyond your own selfish agenda. Asgard is on the verge of war and you do not have the decency to take responsibility for the good of Yggdrasil!”

Loki could have laughed at his father’s obliviousness. He couldn’t know the truth of Loki’s extraneous activities. His ignorance would protect Loki from discovery. For while he believed and projected his youngest son’s egotistical nature, Loki could be free to do what he must. It was better Odin thought badly of him. What did it matter to him how his father thought of him? His opinion could hardly become worse than it already was.

But in the most twisted and revolting way, Loki wanted his approval. He wanted to be the Prince he ought to be, but he couldn’t. He wasn’t selfless enough to be a decent prince. He never really liked the work to begin with, and now he was tempted to believe Odin was right about him.

He cared for naught but himself and what he wanted.

And right now, he wanted Darcy to be safe. He wanted Odin to, in part, be conscious of the fact that he was not as useless as he lead on. There was more to him than magic and being Thor’s younger brother.

Loki looked away from his father, glaring at the shelves full of books, many of which he’d ‘borrowed’ and read with Darcy. “There are forces larger than Yggdrasil that require responsibility.” He muttered.

“Nonsense.” Odin accused, “You are a Prince of Asgard, even if you do not act like one. It is your priority to the realm and to her people. It is your honor to fight for them. It is your privilege to have say in how we proceed in battle! At least Thor understands this in part, and I am becoming unsure whether you do as well, or if it is simply your preference to ignore your duty!”
“You assume my only duty is to Asgard.” He said, wondering if Darcy had gone to sleep yet. She seemed so tired recently.

“I know that you pretend to take accountability for that girl. You made her your Advisor, treating her as though you were her prince rather than Asgard’s! You have not the slightest idea how to act as your title entails!” Odin yelled, his face pulsing red with anger.

Loki turned to Odin, all humor gone and body stiff with rage. “Leave her out of this.”

“Why should I? Is she not the cause of your absence? The conduit which you use to substitute your presence whenever you do not wish to be there? She is the one who has led you to these diversions!” Odin bellowed indicatively, power radiating off him like a star.

Loki no longer looked up to the stars. They were too bright and he had long surpassed them. He had power of his own, and it felt like ice, sucking the heat from everything he so much as looked at. Odin Allfather dared to insult Darcy Lewis. The one person in the universe he cared for more than anything. His love. The one who became his friend when no one else would.

Loki could have blown the room to pieces had he the proper death wish. “You have no idea what she is!”

“Don’t I?” Odin asked sardonically.

“You do not. Just as you have no idea what I am!” Loki said, blood boiling and heart racing. In his anger, a single tear streaked down his cheek. “You do not know anything! You don’t know what I am capable of! You don’t know what I must do!”

Odin raised a finger, advancing on his youngest son. “I know more about what you are than you could ever believe.” Loki refused to turn away as Odin approached him, staring his father directly in his one, hateful eye. “I know that whatever feat you claim to be capable of, it is nothing compared to that which has already happened before you. And as for your Advisor—“

“Enough.”

Loki had never truly appreciated the sound of his mother’s voice till that moment.

Queen Frigga stood in the entrance to Odin’s study, golden hair falling around her shoulders, brighter and fuller than any cape. Her lovely features were contorted with a mix of wrath and apprehension.

The opportunity to escape Odin’s recourse arose and he took it, bowing once to his father with so much spite it could never be sincere. He passed his mother on his way out, wanting nothing more than to take her hands and ask her to magic away his problems. He had no doubt that Frigga, as his mother, could do it.

“Loki,” she called gently, her delicate hand catching his wrist.

Composing himself, he offered her a small smile, taking her hand and kissing it. “Mother.”

She cupped his cheek in her palm, running her thumb along his cheekbone. “Be safe, my son. Please.”

His smile weakened and he patted her knuckles, “Of course.”

As he left he considered apologizing to his mother. She had loved him when no one else had,
taught him magic when he was too weak to fight and found a way for his friend to be a part of his world. And what had he given her in return? An ill conceived promise to stay safe? Neglect of his duties? He was a terrible son. At least she had Thor, the firstborn. The golden child.

With this in mind, Loki carried on, magicking himself far, far away from the palace and straight to a portal to Alfheim.

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Darcy sat at a meeting table, facing Lord Solt and Leader of the Einherjar, Hervingr. Thor sat to her left, as she was filling in for Loki.

“This is absurd, Darcy.” Thor said, gesturing to her proposal, “The production of weaponry ensures Asgard’s safety with the impending war! And if we intend to be fighting both sides…”

“That is still uncertain,” Hervingr pointed out in a clear voice, “Though I agree with Prince Thor. The order to stop production would be inane.”

Solt tapped his fingers on the table, reading over her proposal. “Prince Thor, General Hervingr, I must ask you, meaning no disrespect on any account, if you, in fact, read the entire document Advisor Darcy pieced together before this meeting?”

Both Thor and the General opened their mouths to protest as Solt looked directly at Darcy. “You’ll notice that, if you read past the first paragraph, she extends her proposal. Advisor Darcy, would you mind reading the remainder of your proposal to us, explaining the implications and courses you would intend to take with these liberties. We shall remain silent, as is polite protocol, until you are finished.”

Darcy’s entire body flooded with gratitude. Solt was an old stickler for the rules and Darcy loved him for it. It didn’t matter that he disagreed with almost everything she said, he had his own reasons for disagreeing and argued them without shouting.

“Of course, Lord Solt.” Darcy replied respectfully because Lord Solt was head of the judicial branch and Darcy had a high opinion of him. “Okay, so, if you read on, I propose we stop the creation of the current standard issue weapons for the Einherjar that Odin Allfather implemented a few years ago. These weapons are designed specifically for brutally murdering Frost Giants. Right now, every warrior carries one.

“Unless everyone has somehow forgotten, Asgard made some semblance of peace with the Jotunar a while back. Having the weapons sends a bad message to them and they will be completely ineffective in fighting the Vanir—“

“You have no control on Inter-Realm affairs,” Hervingr interrupted, immediately melting under the angered glare of Lord Solt. He cleared his throat, “My apologies. Continue, Advisor Darcy.”

She glared at him for a moment, laying her hands flat on the table and sincerely wishing she had her glasses. “General Hervingr, you do know how swords work, do you not?”

“Of course.”

“Good,” Darcy said, biting back her need to sass. “Then you’ll know that the size of the current issue is impractical for fighting Vanir. They are skilled swords-people. If we end up fighting the tribes, we’ll be fighting in the forests, relying on wit to save us. Doing that with swords made to take down hulking Frost Giants on expansive, frozen plains will do nothing but cause us harm.”
“Ah,” Thor said, giving a hearty laugh and clapping Darcy on the shoulder, “Well put, Darcy! A reasonable proposal! How can we defend our realm using improper weapons? Of course, I will be wielding Mjolnir, so I am confused on why I was even asked to be in this meeting to begin with.”

Darcy had to hold back the urge to bang her head on the table.

Hervingr, read over the front sheet of her proposal again. “Do you even have the authority to be making these kinds of suggestions? What does a lady know about proper weaponry?”

Solt somehow managed to straighten his posture even more, his aged, shaven face contorting in bitterness. “General Hervingr, you have a place, you’ll do well to stay in it. As for you, Advisor Darcy, for once your plan verges on practicality rather than overtly-liberal. I ask, if you intend to remove the current weapon, what do you propose it be replaced with?”

Darcy flipped through her papers, looking to procure the right page when a voice spoke from the entrance of the conference hall. “A new design that will serve its purpose better than the old.”

Loki walked regally towards the table with that dumb, unintentional swagger of his and Darcy almost fell from her chair. She couldn’t remember seeing him at a meeting. It had been months. And he looked awful. Sure his hair was combed, his armor was neat, and his stance was impeccably ‘Loki’, but he was exhausted. His entire body screamed how badly he needed a rest.

It was strange how much she simultaneously wanted to hug him and kill him.

“Lord Solt, General Hervingr, Advisor Darcy, Prince Thor,” he addressed them all formally. “Forgive my intrusion and tardiness, however you care to view it.”

Solt looked Loki up and down with some light approval at excusing himself. “Please, Prince Loki, join us.”

“Thank you, Lord Solt, but I shall only be a moment.” Loki said as Darcy finally found her words amidst a realm of surprise.

“Loki,” she turned in her seat to face him. She was going to ask what he was doing there, but she remembered they were in a professional setting. “I thought you were preoccupied this evening.”

“Quite.” Loki said, not looking her in the eyes. It broke her heart and made her burn with anger all at once. “I have made the proper arrangements so I might partake in this conference.”

Loki paced the length of the room behind Darcy, out of her view unless she turned which she had yet to do. It hurt to look at him. Did he know that? Did he know how badly she missed him?

“Advisor Darcy’s proposal is indeed practical and I agree with it wholeheartedly. Anyone in opposition to it has no mind but that which likes to be obtuse.” Darcy could almost feel his glare at General Hervingr. “In addition to Darcy’s proposal, I would like to suggest that rather than reinstating the old issue of weaponry, we use a new one that will function more efficiently.”

Darcy blinked and suddenly, a glint of silver caught her eye. In the center of the table sat a sword that had not been there seconds before. It was medium length, silver in color and was similar to that of a machete, but with more Asgardian flare. It was serrated near the hilt, and the grip could accommodate two hands if need be.

“General Hervingr, you are correct in saying that Advisor Darcy, due to the limitations of her title, does not have say in foreign affairs. She cannot make you take these weapons to Vanaheim. It does not matter that they will be useful in maneuvering the forests, or that they will be easier to use
against both the tribes and the nobles, whichever we fight.” Loki said softly, coming to stand beside her, his lean form dominating the room’s attention.

“But there is much you do not know about Advisor Darcy, General.” Loki said his fist clenching at his side. Darcy wanted very much to take it, help him relax. She wanted him to hold her.

“What is there to know?” Hervingr sneered, “That she has been interfering at every opportunity with the happenings with Vanaheim? Or that she is yours?”

Darcy stood, “Alright, I’ve heard enough. Hervingr, swallow your pride for two seconds. Take the weapon, I know even you can’t deny that this proposal is golden. And for your information, I do not belong to anyone. I am Loki’s advisor. It’s my job and I do it the best I can, thank you very much.”

There was a moment of silence until Thor cleared his throat. “I believe Darcy does well.”

Solt stiffened the line of his mouth, “The meeting description was that of a weapons proposal plan, not of Advisor Darcy’s duties. I believe we have all that is necessary to form a committee to take to the Allfather.”

“Of course.” Loki said politely. “Thank you for your time.”

With that he turned to leave and Darcy watched him, quickly coming to her senses. “Excuse me.” She said, dismissing herself.

Hurriedly, she followed Loki from the room, almost having to run to catch up with him before he could get away. Suddenly, it was as if the barrier dividing her hurt and anger broke and every ounce of patience she had in giving Loki time to sort himself out and come back to her flooded out of her in one huge, “What the fuck was that, Loki?”

They were standing in a hall that also served as a balcony, the golden pillars reflecting the last of the evening sunlight. Loki was a few paces in front of her, his dark hair and black leather contrasting with the glimmering golden landscape. He stopped walking, turning his head to the side, not enough to face her or give her a proper profile of his face, just enough to give her his attention.

“I thought I might do my duty as Prince to help my realm.” He said simply, though he didn’t move. He stood there, as if waiting.

Darcy took a cautious step, terrified that he might disappear. “You haven’t been to a meeting in months, Loki. I think this is the longest conversation we’ve had since December.”

Loki said nothing and Darcy kept walking towards him, till his shoulder was at arm’s length. “Loki.”

He remained still, but spoke. “There is no need to make this battle bloodier than it already will be. You were right; the current issue sword will do a poor job at defeating the Vanir and maneuvering them through the forests would be a task. Not to mention the beasts that live in the forest as well.”

“Loki, look at me.” Darcy urged, her throat thick. “Please, Loki. I…I can’t keep doing this. This thing where we never say anything to each other and I don’t know what to do…I can’t do it, Lokes. We’re not friends anymore.”

She bowed her head, turning away to hide the tear rolling down her cheek. That’s when she felt his hand, familiar and warm, brushing the length of her cheekbone. Darcy leaned into his touch,
overwhelmed by his small show of affection.

“I miss you.” She whispered, another one of her tears wetting his palm.

“Darcy.” He said her name, voice rough with emotion. She looked him in the eyes, taking in all that he had been hiding from her these past few months. Every ounce of effort he’d been putting forward to keep his distance from her fell away, walls crumbled, stars blew into pieces as he took her hand and held it to his cheek.

The invitation to touch him, his warmth after months of coldness won over her need to hug him. In an instant, her arms were wrapped around his shoulders, her face buried in his neck as she tried to hide her sobs. Without hesitation, he returned her embrace so fiercely it hurt.

“Darcy, do not cry, my love.” He said against her hair. It was clear he was in no better shape than her.

Darcy wasn’t about to stop crying anytime soon. Call her weak, but life was fucking hard and sometimes she just needed to cry. “Where have you been, Loki?” she asked shakily. “What have you been doing?”

He was silent for a long moment as Darcy’s ragged breathing slowed and she was able to savor the parts of hugging Loki that she’d missed so much. His pillow hardly smelled like him anymore and his body felt different. He felt harder, in a sense. His hair had gotten a little longer and it wasn’t combed back as it normally was. A few black strands hung down to his chin and Darcy reached up to push one behind his ear.

“If I tell you,” he said softly, his green eyes pleading to her. “You will be angry.”

“Loki,” she sniffed, sinking her fingers into his hair and linking them on the nape of his neck, “I’m already angry. I’m mad that you’ve been ignoring me and keeping me at arm’s length, especially after we came back from a rather traumatizing trip into the galaxy. And I’m downright furious that you’re suffering so much and I can do nothing about it.”

Something flashed in his eyes and every bit of him softened. All of his hard edges and sharp looks melted like butter in a microwave. “I’m sorry you’re worried.”

She ran her thumb under the corner of his eye and thought back to a time almost a year ago. “I’m not worried anymore, Loki.” She said, never once breaking eye contact. “I am desperate.”

Loki closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath, his hands grasping hers as he fought through whatever was going on inside his head.

They stood there for a long moment and Darcy was sure that someone was going to walk past. Maybe they did. Maybe word was already spreading through the palace that Loki and Darcy were together, being affectionate in the hall. Darcy couldn’t care, she only waited.

Finally, when the sunset had changed from a yellow glow to an orange one, setting fire to the golden pillars and statues that framed the dark prince and the intractable mortal, Loki spoke so low that she could barely hear him.

“I’ve been searching for Infinity stones.”

Darcy’s insides seemed to break apart into tiny pieces with that one tiny declaration. “What?”

“Infinity Stones.” He repeated himself, opening his eyes to stare down at her dolefully.
Her knees felt weak as she thought back to their last expedition. Sure they both made it out alive, but they were together for most of it. If he had died, she would have had some inclination that it had happened. “Loki.” She breathed, her hands slipping down from his face. “Oh, Loki, why?”

He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head. “Because I must, Darcy. I have no choice.”

“You do have a choice, Loki.” She told him, taking his hands in hers. “Why would you think that you don’t have a choice? The stones…they’re a side project we started when we were kids, Loki.”

“And they’re dangerous, Darcy.” He implored, his eyes, masked in dark, tired circles, swept over her. “I thought I lost you once and I won’t do it again.”

Darcy’s brows furrowed as her blood began to simmer. “Loki, we lost each other. I thought you were just as dead as you believed me to be and I still got my ass out of there. And you think that this will solve your problem? Going out searching for stones? Risking your life and for what purpose, Loki?”

He didn’t answer, looking her dead in the eye as if she was supposed to have a clue.

Only she did have a clue. She knew why. She’d known why for quite some time now.

“Me.” She said choking on a mass of confused sentiments. “Loki…”

Ever so gently, he placed his hand over her heart. The sweetheart neckline of her dress allowed for their skin to meet and a chill to spread over her body from where he touched her. Her heart beat loudly, whether from anger or something else entirely, she had no idea.

“You.” Loki confirmed, and Darcy absently noticed how close they were to one another. She could feel his breath against her lips, their bodies creating a kind of heat that Darcy wanted to bask in.

Instead she shook her head, “Loki, that’s so fucking stupid. Finding the Infinity Stones isn’t going to make anyone safer. In fact, you might draw people to them by searching them out.”

“Darcy, I told you before, I must do it.” Loki repeated, pressing his palm a bit more firmly against her chest to better feel her heart. “And you,” he exhaled deeply, “are mortal.”

Hurt washed over her and she stepped back, “Does that bother you now or something?”

“Darcy,” he reached for her hand, but she clenched it into a fist before he could take it. “Please.”

“Listen up, Loki, because I want you to remember every word I’m about to tell you,” Darcy said, angry tears pricking her already red and agitated eyes.

“I’m a human, but I am not ‘only’ human. Being a mortal does not make me weak on some inordinate level. You may be a Prince and a genius and a master of magic, but god fucking dammit I am Darcy fucking Lewis. You cannot make decisions for me just because you think it’ll be safer or some other ridiculous noble bullshit like that. My job on Asgard might be your Advisor and I may be just a highschool student, but you are sincerely underestimating me and you know it.” She said, uncaring of who heard her. Let them hear if they must.

“You’re caught up worrying about what my life means to you and not considering what yours means to me.” Darcy said, her voice cracking a bit. “We’re friends.”

He shook his head, the tiniest, bitterest smile making its home on his lips. “We are not friends, Darcy.”
His words took a moment to sink in and she felt her heart break. “What?”

Loki frowned, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “I love you, Darcy.”

The truth dawned on her as the last remnants of blood-red sun glimmered from sight. It made more sense to her now than it ever had before. Loki loved her. It was not enough for him to say that he was in love with her, just as it was not enough to say that she was in love with him. It was more than that. Everything they had, everything they were together was founded on years of childhood friendship and random fits of laughter, long nights slaving over this problem or the next, early mornings and lazy afternoons spent lounging in bed.

She needed him as he needed her. It was not dependence; they could go on without one another. But in what realm, what plane of existence, would they want to do that?

Darcy linked their fingers together, “I love you too.”

Loki’s breaths were measured and his brow crinkled as if the words he was about to say burned him. “It does not change anything.”

It was dark now. The stars had yet to shine and dusk was at its prime. Darcy squeezed his hand, willing some sense into his stubborn mind. “How? How could that not change anything?”

“Because, Darcy,” Loki murmured, “I have no choice. I need to find them.”

She stared at him incredulously. Something had to have happened to him. There was another part to this search for the stones that he wasn’t telling her. “Why do you think that, Loki? What more is there to all this?”

Loki was silent and Darcy took his refusal as a rejection. This was it. He chose whatever force was keeping him tied to the Infinity Stones over her.

The stars finally peaked through the night, their bright light illuminating Asgard’s moons and painting the hall in an ethereal glow. Hurt, angry, and rejected, Darcy broke the silence. “Just take me home, Loki.”

Frank and Fenrir appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, catching up to their owners just in time for Loki to transport them to the portal and back to Midgard.

He left with Frank just as soon as he came. Her double disappeared with him and Darcy took her space on the bed, flopping face-down and contemplating screaming angrily into her pillow.

But she didn’t have enough energy to do it.

Fenrir climbed on her back, laying across her body and whining comfortingly. Darcy sighed, rolling over to rub his ears. “He’s so dumb, Fenrir.”

The dog licked her chin and Darcy closed her eyes, longing for some kind of feeling that wasn’t pain. She felt as though Yggdrasil was being torn up from its roots.

Her phone buzzed, temporarily excavating her from the pit of emotions she’d gotten herself into.

She had a missed call from Johnny Storm.

Her boyfriend.

Darcy sighed, rubbing her eyes. How had she become that girl? The one that must choose between
two boys, one devilishly handsome and the other angelic in every possible way.

Snorting, she scratched behind Fenrir’s ears and he made a sound like a hiss.

Neither Johnny nor Loki could, in any way, be considered angelic. And she wasn’t choosing either of them. Because, when it came down to it, there was no choice.

Asgard knew her as Advisor Darcy, the lady that keeps Prince Loki on track and is passionate about the realm’s politics.

Midgard and Johnny and her parents and friends knew her as Darcy Lewis, that one chick with the boobs that wants to go to Culver.

But Loki…Loki knew her as both. Loki knew her for who she was and he loved her for it. He loved her, pushing her away nonetheless.

And she loved him back even so. But how could she be with him, platonically or otherwise, when he was out risking his life for the sake of a few shiny rocks?

Not that it mattered. At the moment, Darcy didn’t feel like being herself. She didn’t want to be Advisor Darcy or anyone even remotely like Darcy Lewis.

Anger pricked at her insides like a needle, the sensation growing with every passing second. Getting out of bed, she snatched her phone, dialing Johnny’s number.

“Hey, Hotstuff. I’m coming over.”

She hung up her phone, almost leaving her room before she remembered that she was, in fact, still dressed as an Asgardian noblewoman. Pissed, she stripped off the dress and threw on some sweats, charging down the stairs.

“Mom! I’m going to see Johnny! I’ll be back!” she called and her mother shouted back some response about being home before midnight.

It didn’t take her long to get there in her rage. Johnny answered the door in the first knock and she was on him like fire to dry grass. His response was delayed, but passionate as he shut the door, backing her against it as they kissed. Darcy wrapped her leg around his, making her intentions entirely clear.

And thankfully, Johnny didn’t push her away. He only kissed harder, grabbing her legs and hoisting them around his waist. “Oh, fuck, Darcy.” He panted between kisses. “When you said it would be a surprise, I didn’t think it would be this much of a surprise.”

“Neither did I.” Darcy said, arching her body against his, her head hitting the door as she exposed her neck to him. He placed a few quick kisses there and she moaned at the contact. “Your bedroom.”

Her lips sunk back down to his and he nodded in agreement, “Yeah.”

He let her down and they stumbled clumsily to the stairs, Darcy kicking off her shoes in the process. Halfway down the hall, Johnny lost his shirt and in the darkness of his room, Darcy shucked her pants.

They fell onto his bed in a messy, desperate tangle. Johnny groped at her ass and chest as she straddled his lap. Her shirt came off and he sat up suddenly. “Holy shit, I forgot.” He hurriedly
moved from beneath her, adjusting his pants as he went to leave the room. “I’ll be right back.”

Darcy sat there in the darkness, not able to fully comprehend what was going on. Her mind was clouded with lust and fire and anger and all she wanted to do was fuck it out. She was about ready to go after him, when he returned with a green candle in a cigarette lighter.

“Okay,” he said, setting the candle on his nightstand and lighting it, “I know I promised you multiple candles, but this one smells like pine and I thought I could compensate for the tasteless dinner I was going to make us with this awesome smelling candle.”

Darcy quirked a grin, inhaling the scent. Pine. It was awfully familiar. She shook her head. “It hides the smell of your room. You get boy scout points for always being prepared.”

“Scouts honor.” He said, smiling flirtingly as he kissed her.

They fell back against the sheets and Darcy undid his belt buckle, subconsciously trying to place the smell.

Her bra went then her panties, and she attempted to force the thought from her mind.

He squeezed her, she kissed him. Johnny didn’t stop to ask her anything and she was glad he didn’t. She pushed his pants and underwear with her feet and he kicked them aside gracelessly.

Darcy closed her eyes as Johnny reached between them. “Ready Lewis?”

“Yeah.” Was her only reply as she tugged him down to fuse their mouths back together.

He entered her and Darcy closed her eyes, letting her thoughts carry her far, far away.

Pine.

Enormous wooden bed frames and stone fireplaces, white furs and thick sheets, nightclothes strewn about and peace. Careless, blissful peace.

Tranquility was forever infused in the scent of pine. Thryheim was an embedded memory and Darcy relaxed in Johnny Storm’s bed, thrusting her hips to meet his, trying to increase the rising pleasure in her body. She couldn’t think about Thryheim without remembering Loki and every jerk of her hips, every moan, every bite was just reminder she was with Johnny and not him.

Johnny let his head fall into the pillow and Darcy sucked on his shoulder. She felt his arms and scratched his back, listening to the sounds he made, keeping herself constantly aware of who he was. She ran her fingers through his short hair, bringing her mouth back to his.

“Harder.” She begged through their kisses. “Please, harder.”

Johnny swore, “Any harder, babe, and we won’t be doing this much longer.”

She took his lip between her teeth, snaking a hand between them. “It’s okay,” she assured, “I’ve got it.”

In seconds she was gone, her mind ecstatically blank as Johnny followed with a gasp of relief.

For what could have been hours they didn’t move as Darcy cling to the fleeting remains of her release. After a moment, Johnny rolled to his side, leaning over to kiss her once. “I was so right.”

She smiled, unable to get past how dorky Mr. Johnny Storm looked with sex hair and a hickey,
beaming like nothing could ever go wrong ever again. “That was the best sex of my life. I take back what I said about you being a virgin. Virgins aren’t that loud.”

Smirking, Darcy grabbed the pillow from under her head and hit him with it. “I wasn’t that loud!”

Johnny laughed, falling back against the pillows, naked spare one sock on his left foot. “You totally were! You’re just lucky Sue and my Dad are out.”

“Sue is home?” Darcy asked, adjusting Johnny’s blankets so she could wiggle under them and cuddle up to her boyfriend.

“Yeah,” Johnny said, gently easing away from her. “Hey, babe, don’t take this the wrong way, but I kind of am super sweaty right now and skin on skin would be a bit gross. I’m going to go put some pants on and get food.”

Darcy nodded, trying not to be too offended. She knew Johnny wasn’t very cuddly. Apparently that meant after sex too. Sharon always cuddled after oral. Loki—

Sitting up, Darcy tried to vanish Loki from her mind. What was happening? What had she done?

She stared at Johnny’s bedroom door and the rock band poster taped to it.

Johnny Storm may not have been the most sensitive kind of guy, but he had feelings for her. Darcy wouldn’t doubt that. But did she have feelings for him?

Of course she cared about him. She liked to see him happy and she worried if he got sick or didn’t return her calls after a couple hours. She liked to know that he was healthy. She enjoyed their flirting and thought it was fun to hang out with him. He turned her on and every once in awhile, he might hold her hand or say something to her and little butterflies beat at her tummy.

But mostly he was her friend and she loved him as such.

Standing up, Darcy found her underwear and put them on, deciding that it was best she go. That’s when Johnny walked back in, a bottle of water tucked under his arm. In one hand he held a mug of what Darcy hoped was coffee and in the other a pizza box.

Darcy turned away from him, mildly ashamed at her lack of substantial clothing. Johnny set down the stuff, “Here, I’ll get you a shirt.”

He expertly stepped over several piles of discarded clothes to his closet where a singular, gray t-shirt hung on a plastic hanger. He offered it to her gentlemanly and Darcy rolled her eyes in good humor, accepting his offering. “Is this your last clean shirt?”

“Why, yes. Yes, it is.”Johnny answered, sitting down on his bed, shirtless and popping open the pizza box. “Also, this pizza came about five minutes before you busted down my door to have your filthy way with me. I’m sharing it with you. If that doesn’t prove how much I lo—like you,” he cleared his throat, “I don’t know what will.”

Darcy hummed, sitting back down and picking up a slice of pizza and sipping her coffee. As casual as she made herself out to be, there was an aching, guilty chord being plucked in her chest. The feelings she had for Johnny were girlish. They were warm and shallow.

But in a world where she hadn’t known Asgard or Loki, in a world where Midgard was her home and her priorities were school and romantic relationships, she might believe she was in love with Johnny Storm.
She willed herself into that position. She bit into her pizza and sipped her coffee, taking the place of a girl who was ready to stay out late at her boyfriend’s house, not because she wanted to forget about her alien prince and containing a war, but because she thought she was in love.

As she and Johnny ate and he explained in detail how round two was going far surpass any sexual expectation she ever had.

And during round two, Darcy closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of pine, and resolving that she could fall in love with Johnny Storm if she tried hard enough.

***

Loki could not remember ever feeling so empty.

Every part of him ached with dull, unyielding pain.

He could have given himself to Darcy in that moment, given up on his forlorn quest and fall into embrace. They could have kissed under the stars and he could have told her every dream he ever had of her as his light. His companion. His equal. He could have told her every thought he ever had about the two of them going to bed late and sleeping in on the weekends and dancing during a feast.

But he hadn’t.

His reasons weren’t noble.

He didn’t refuse to tell Darcy because he had an obligation to the universe. He tore himself away from her because he truly had no choice. The prophecy foretold his future. He would find the stones, be it now or the next day, he would have to come across them.

Loki wanted it to be over with. He wanted them found and secured. He wanted Darcy and the taste of her lips.

Before when she was making her point, reminding him that she was powerful, he wanted to tell her she was right. He wanted to tell her that his insecurities were not that she was weak, but that she was too strong. Her fierce determination and power of mind were strong enough to combat any fool daring enough to take her on.

And what happens after that fool sees how strong she is? What pains will they go through to see her done? The weak ones are shown mercy, a knife to the throat to end their suffering. The stronger ones are put to the test.

It was better to deny himself her love now, deny them both one another and save them the later hurt.

And he hated himself all the more for it.

Stumbling into his corner to the library, he found the back of a chair, squeezing the wood, grounding himself to something. The rising anger inside him threatened to lash out. He wanted to blame someone, anyone, for what was happening. But who had he to blame but himself?

With a hard jerk of his hands, the chair shattered. Chips of wood sprayed across the room and it felt good. He unleashed his magic, giving it no specific instruction but to reflect his madness. Books flew from the shelves, papers flew, quills broke, ink spilt…. It was chaotic.
“Something the matter, Your Highness?”

Loki contained his magic at once, letting the room still at the unsuspected appearance of Lorelei. He’d heard someone lurking, but had hoped it would not be her.

“Be gone.” He ordered and she clicked her tongue, stepping closer. He faced the window, avoiding her eyes.

But Lorelei did not understand the concept of a command. It was either that, or she believed she was above it. For, rather than leaving, she strode closer, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

When Loki said nothing, she stepped around the mess to face him, her palms on his chest, her fingers toying with his armor.

He kept his eyes on the window, refusing to look at her. Lorelei was not Darcy. She was a venom; a poison. Foul toxin that he was highly susceptible to. Her touch pained him.

As her fingers roamed up the length of his neck, over his jaw, across his cheekbone, he contemplated pushing her away. But when they reached his hair and they pushed a stray lock behind his ear, he realized it was no use.

Giving in, his gaze flicked down to her and anger re-ignited in his blood. Her eyes gleamed like that of a predator as she stood on her toes to kiss his unresponsive lips.

There was one thing she forgot.

He was not prey.

She kissed him again and this time he responded with fervor, determined that if she was going to pour poison down his throat, he would drink it willingly.

He pulled her closer, swallowing her shocked gasp as she tried to find her way under his armor. Growling in frustration, Loki grabbed her wrists, pinning them to her sides.

Lorelei’s back arched in triumph and she broke the kiss. Sitting on the edge of the table, she spread her legs for him. “Make me yours, Prince Loki.”

He glowered at taunting eyes and wanton body. After a moment’s hesitation and a sharp pain in his heart, he stepped between her legs. He glared down at her, “You will never be mine.”

It hurt to be inside her and the pain heightened when she tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling his head down to whisper in his ear, “Let her go, Loki.” She said between tiny gasps, “It could never happen.”

“You know nothing.” He snarled, thrusting deeper, stealing her words for just a little longer, “I know she’s not here,” Lorelei replied once her voice returned, her nails biting into his neck, “And I am.”

The truth marred him from the inside-out. Because it wasn’t Darcy he was giving himself away to, it was Lorelei. And it wouldn’t be Darcy’s taste on his lips when he went to his potential death later that night, it would be faint traces of poison. He would be long before any terrible beast could tear him apart.

Loki clenched his eyes shut, suffocating himself in her hair. Toxic smoke from her skin filled his
lungs and left chemical burns in his mouth.

Her peak was his downfall. Her body shook and pulsed around his throbbing self. He felt beat, used, and very tired. Sleep called to him in the night’s early hours.

Yet he did not go to it. There was no realm of comfort that could match that of Darcy’s bed. The aroma cast by her hair, her colorful nightclothes and soft little snores were just a few of his sanctuary’s qualities.

Loki turned away from Lorelei, righting himself and disappearing without a second glance.

Somewhere far away, under a glittering, star-filled sky, Loki waited for them to redress his wrongs. Alas, the stars only blinked cluelessly, leaving him to abandon that which he’d already lost long ago.

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Frigga strode through the corridor with the kind of enraged elegance only a queen could acquire

At last, almost an entire season after the council had given Odin their arguments as to which side of Vanaheim they believed Asgard should support, her idiot husband makes his decision.

Seething with rage, Frigga stormed into the Allfather’s study, dismissing the guards with only a look. War was upon them and they did not wish to be caught in the crossfire. The King of Asgard, her husband, Allfather of the Nine Realms and the heartless father to her children sat at his desk, staring at a scroll. “Odin Borson, you dare—“

“No interrupt.” She snapped, composing herself only slightly, “You were presented three perspectives by the court. Firstly, the most reasonable option that Asgard side with the Vanir tribes. The capital would have been overwhelmed and little blood would be shed.” Frigga explained, slowly advancing towards his desk, “Alas, you decline this.”

“Frigga—“

“Secondly,” she continued without so much as acknowledging that Odin had spoken. “That Asgard side with the capital. This, of course, would have enraged the Vanir further at the injustice of their situation. Their argument for greater representation in Vanir politics is not unfounded. Nevertheless, we could have ended this dispute soon enough.”

Odin sighed, sitting back in his chair and kneading his brow.

Glaring, Frigga squared her shoulders, staring down at the Allfather, “Lastly, there was the most impractical option that only a fool with more might than mind would have chosen.” She said lightly, her tone sharpening as she went on. “And that choice is to barge into Vanaheim and take neither side. The Asgardian men will simply massacre enough of the Vanir people that they shall be forced to resign.”

Odin sat, unmoving as he responded tiredly to his wife’s rant. “Are you finished yet?”

“Hardly.” She replied her tone softer than before and filled with enough threat that the Allfather was forced to look at her. “Odin, your choice will be the end of peace with Vanaheim.”

“My choice…” he scoffed, standing up to pace the length of his study. “You would have Asgard
side with the tribes in order to intimidate the nobles. And for what? Because you believe they are justified? Things are fine as they were, the tribes are simply looking to stir up trouble.”

“Then why not the side of the nobles?” Frigga asked, “Why not fight with them?”

“Frigga,” Odin began impatiently, “Freya has been difficult in the past and—“

“Wonderful.” She interrupted, turning away from her husband in disgust. “You refuse to uphold a treaty simply because you cannot agree with someone else’s methods.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Odin protested, banging Gungnir on the ground. “Freya and I have never truly gotten along. Fighting with her would be detrimental to the warriors”—“

“Your words are of little weight. Your excuses are childish.” Frigga said, lifting her chin, daring him to continue unloading his horse shit onto her plate. The Queen was quite fond of Freya. She was an intelligent woman, though extremely forthcoming at times. In fact, she was so forthcoming that the last time the Queen of Vanaheim and the King of Asgard were in the same room, someone almost lost their remaining eye.

That, and Freya rightfully called the Allfather a ‘degenerate slug’ for reeking such havoc on Vanaheim when battling the Frost Giants.

And now, in Vanaheim’s time of need, he refused to see reason.

Odin grimaced, approaching her as if he might say anything that could change her mind. “What would you have me do?”

“Finally you are asking the right questions.” Frigga told him, her anger receding. “I ask you this, Odin, as both Queen of the Realm Eternal and your wife, fight with the tribes.”

He stared at her curiously, slowly returning to his chair. “There is more to this than you are telling me.”

Frigga offered him the tiniest of smiles, “It’s about time you’ve caught on.”

There was a moment of silence as Odin watched her questioningly through his one blue eye. “Will you tell me?”

“Do you not already know?” she quipped readily.

“If I already knew, I would not be asking.”

“Surely you must have some idea.”

He banged his staff once in irritation, looking more like a frumpy, bearded child than a king. “God dammit, woman! Tell me!”

Frigga narrowed her eyes at him until he muttered a quiet, “please.”

Stepping lightly, Frigga moved towards a stack of books, lifting the cover of one and smiling at the memories she had of such tome. “Lord Bjarte has been advocating for you to side with the nobles.”

Odin sneered at her words. “You accuse me of being childish and here you have a grudge all your own.”

It took great strength to keep her wits about her and not de-throne her husband in that moment.
“And you wonder why I tend to keep my secrets to myself. I no sooner begin then I am ridiculed.”

Clearing his throat, Odin gestured for her to continue. “My apologies.”

“Hm.” Frigga hummed, glancing towards the shelves where, several years earlier, she had warned Bjarte that his war would indeed happen. She made sure Darcy was there to witness it. “Lord Bjarte is a liar. He does not truly want to fight with the nobles. It is a ploy.”

“And why do you suspect such a thing?”

She folded her hands in front of her, watching the stars twinkle expectantly. They were waiting. “You have been listening in those meetings, have you not? It is apparent in his very tone. His lies appeal to those who think too bluntly.”

Odin’s temper rose at the insult. “You do not trust Bjarte, yet you wish to comply to his wishes on who to support?”

“Yes.” Frigga answered immediately. “I have explained all that I can. The rest will soon come to light. Change your verdict, Allfather. See to it that this conflict is solved once and for all.”

He said not a word and Frigga went to his side, taking his hand. “Trust me, Darling.”

At last, he relented, squeezing her hand. The gesture was warm and comforting and familiar. It reminded Frigga of a time before the war, for it had changed him so much. “I trust you more than anyone, Frigga. I fear that I am a fool to do so, but I will do as you say.”

“Thank you,” Frigga said, gently slipping her hand from his grasp. “Freya has officially declared the war then?”

“Yes, she has.”

“When shall we send the troops?” Frigga asked, reading over his papers briefly. There was nothing she didn’t know already.

“In two days time.” Odin said without hesitation. “The summer has just begun. We need not put it off any longer, for wounds fester in the heat.”

“Indeed.” Frigga whispered to herself, a heavy sense of dread swelling in her stomach. “I shall leave you to it then.”

As she had begun to depart, Odin spoke again. “Frigga, I must ask you a favor. I daresay, you will not like me for it.”

Sadly, Frigga turned to him. “I am sorry to say that is not an unlikely occurrence as of late.”

“Quite,” Odin said, studying her for a long, sorrowful moment. “Keep Loki’s advisor out of this as much you can.”

The Allmother was affronted as her husband went on to defend his request.

“She has done nothing but interfere with this war. She had no right at all to even be present, let alone contribute to anything related to inter-realm affairs. She is an advisor.”

Frigga waited a solid moment in irritated silence before retaliating. “No.”

“Frigga—“
“She is Loki’s advisor and her own person. She has her right, as a citizen of Asgard, to fight in any battle if she wishes. I will not tell her what she can and cannot do, especially when I believe it is crucial she go.” Frigga argued plainly.

Odin made a sound of disgust, “I do not understand you, Frigga. The boy has done naught but lie and deceive us this past year. He has neglected his duties, taken advantage of his title…you can hardly call him a prince.”

“Are we no longer using his name then?” she asked tersely, “Loki was correct in saying you have not the slightest idea of who his is.”

“Come now, Frigga.” Odin urged, leaning forwards across his desk. “At least we have some idea what Thor is doing. He’s being a young man, partaking in that which is expected of him at some point. Loki goes off on his own, leaving that blasted girl to take his place.”

Frigga sighed, her heart aching for her son. “Why must you be so cruel to him? All he has ever wanted is to have your approval, and all you do is push him away. You insult his talents and her, who he loves—“

“He does not love that middling lady!” Odin growled in protest. “She knows not her place. Once Loki has put an end to this chapter in his life, she will be done with.”

“Leave future predictions to me, Allfather.” Frigga told him sourly, “And care of how you speak. Loki is going through something that you, in all your years, could never imagine.”

“Frigga—“

“He is my son.” She said resolutely. “You may cast him aside, but I will not. I love him as any mother loves their child.”

Odin grit his teeth, “And you think I do not?”

“Have you ever shown that you do?” Frigga asked, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

“Frigga,” The Allfather began in a firmer tone. “Keep in mind that he is not truly yours.”

Time seemed to stop just as the King of Asgard realized the mistake of his words.

Frigga’s every fiber shook with rage as she advanced on a man she no longer knew. In that moment, she could have slaughtered the entirety of the Vanir forces without a second glance; but, she would settle for Odin Allfather.

With a steely gaze she glared down at him, “Listen to me, Allfather, and listen well. Some two-thousand years ago you came home from Jotunheim with a missing eye and a sick, dying child. You told me whose it was and you placed this child in my arms.” Several angry tears fell from her eyes as she clenched her hand into a fist.

“You told me your plans for him and all that he would become and I laughed.” Frigga smiled through her tears at the memory. “I laughed because that babe I held could hardly breathe, let alone unite two warring realms. Thor was sleeping in his cradle not far away and I asked myself if I could do it. Could I raise a child, the son of my realm’s sworn enemy?”

Frigga shook her head, the pain in her heart ebbing as she remembered. “And that’s when he looked at me. I knew what he was and whose crown he was meant to inherit. I knew who hated his kind and who would have slaughtered him in the snow.” She gave Odin a watery, sad smile. “But
he didn’t know that. He only looked at me with those eyes of his, begging someone, anyone, to
love him.

“I did not choose to love this child so much, for the choice was not mine. And even if it were, I
would not have it any other way. I named him. I nursed him back to health. I spent days answering
his every question and curiosity, teaching him magic, helping him to be all that he could. And I am
proud of him, Odin, as I have always been proud of him.

“So know this Allfather,” Frigga said, her voice gravelly and low from crying. “If you dare to tell
me that he is not my son ever again,” she leaned menacingly across the cluttered surface of his
desk, “you will lose the other eye.”

Frigga did not bother to gauge Odin’s reaction, for she could taste his surprise and his hurt and his
impending apology. But she did not wish to hear his words. There were far greater things than her
husband’s guilty conscience that needed her attention.

So, she left, the stars applauding her as she set to work, making the necessary preparations for the
war to come.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone!

Per usual, I just wanted to mention a couple things at the end of this installment.
First and foremost, I believe that the fanfic universe has some sort of connection to
both the pill and the condom when it comes to forms of contraception. I decided that
Darcy Lewis, an intelligent and progressive young woman, with her right as a sixteen
year old girl and her doctor mother's super awesome insurance, ought to consider a
non-hormonal IUD (Paragard). Mostly because hormones are a bitch and you gotta
take the pill everyday for it to be effective. Screw that, I'm a lazy author. IUD solves
all my problems.

NEXT, Johnny and Darcy's relationship.
They're teenagers. Johnny, at this point, has probably never been with anyone who
handles things like Darcy. She's smarter, a bit more mature in some regards. He really
likes that about her.
As for Darcy, she was a bit difficult for me two write for this. Mainly bc I hate writing
the "Oh, I'm a girl and I have to chose between these two men” troupe. I'm not about
that. She likes Johnny; She loves Loki. But she can't be with Loki, so, she tries really
hard to be with Johnny and love him instead. I'm not saying that's a healthy way to go
about relationships. It isn't. But I think it's safe to say we've all been a little toxic at
some point. We've all done things we wished we wouldn't have. Darcy's gotta go
through that too. I promise, everything'll turn out in the end.

Now I'm going to talk about Loki.
Let's get one thing straight: I'm not.
lol, okay, but seriously tho.
I suck at writing angst. This is my first, true angsty work and it took a lot of me traveling my emotions to make this 'real' to some extent. Everyone experiences their downs differently. Darcy, during hers, always needed to be held. She needed closeness and assurance. Loki is kinda the opposite. He's a great deal more self-destructive than Darcy and he's not that great at handling himself when he gets like that. While a great portion of his going out after Infinity Stones comes from his need to protect Darcy, a lot of it is also him being super anxious and sad and not knowing how to handle it. I could say a lot more on this, but I'm running out of word space.

Onto happier subjects!
Odin! haha! Wow, what an asshole, amiright? That's all. Just had to remind y'all that Odin is a dick. Not that you needed reminding, but ya know.

A quick thing about Sigyn and Baldur.
It's kind of important that I made that apprenticeship a thing. I needed to wait a while before I started it because character development and all that shite.
One thing I want to be very clear about with Sigyn: I have not made her a blacksmith's apprentice to make her manly. I wouldn't say Sigyn is a very girly character, but she is womanly. She likes being a woman, she just hates her life a little bit and is super salty about it. There is a purpose behind all of this, I swear it is only the start of something new.

Okay. I also talk about some drugs in here. Depending on the High School party and the area in which the party is taking place, the illegal substances consumed can vary. I often times resent High School realism where the jocks and the cheerleaders all bash on the geeks and smoke behind the bleachers and so on and so forth. But, hey, some of it does happen. Weed and Mushrooms are psychedelics. Shrooms, in a great enough quantity can cause hallucinations, but not...like...major ones. I've only met one person that tripped really hard on shrooms. Grace has an experience. I'm not promoting drugs. Don't do drugs. Drugs are illegal in different amounts in different places. Find Jesus Christ.
Just kidding, kids. Everything in moderation.
Except drugs.
God, I'm so conflicted.

On that lovely note, one last thing.
This author's note makes me sound like a hippie who has a lot of safe sex, then afterwards teaches people the art of meditation to control their anger and anxieties and release all negative energies while rolling up joints from my big bag of weed.
Well, I'll have you know that's just not true. For your information, I only meditate on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I do so alone, without my Colombian lover, Florentino, because he is currently residing in New York City, making a name for himself as a musical theatre producer. As for the big bag of weed:

I gave it to Bruce. He needed it more than me.

Thank you everyone for reading. Chapter 30 should be around quicker. Because I'm cool like that and I already have it started. Know that I love you all, thank you, you beautiful cinnamon buns!

P.S. Did you expect that pic of Bruce's face to be that big? Cuz I didn't. I'm keeping it tho. Adds charm.
Frigga is the mother of all mothers. Darcy and Loki make up. *wink...WINKWINKWINKWINK* The plan 2.0.

Chapter Notes

Hello! It's me! Q! I still exist! Does life ever bite you really hard in the ass? Because my muse literally went on a fucking vacation. She stayed gone. She was in Thailand or something. Partying with baby elephants. Fucker.

Anyways, she came back! Yay! And we have this chapter!

Warning: there's some violence. It's not bad, but...like...yah know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frigga narrowed her eyes skeptically at her son and his advisor.

The war had been announced to Asgard yesterday morning and since then, the Queen could hardly keep Darcy calm. She was bouncing back and forth from the scrying pool in the center of Frigga’s chambers to this meeting or that, trying with all her might to piece together the war.

Frigga wished she could simply tell her the truth, but to do so would defeat the very purpose of Bjarte’s little game.

The High Lord wished for an exposition of the Allmother’s deception towards the people of Asgard. He wanted to show them that she was a liar, thus convincing citizens of the Realm Eternal that the crown was untrustworthy and deceitful. No doubt Bjarte’s plan would result in sedition, ultimately ending with Gungnir in his hands and his arrogant self planted on the throne.

Frigga had no intention of letting this happen.

Revealing Bjarte’s plan for treason to Asgard would be playing into his hands. She could not arrest him without proper claims and, unfortunately for her, it was more likely that, should the truth be divulged, it would be the royal family who would pay the price.

It would seem that Bjarte had the upper hand on all accounts. At least, that’s what Frigga was hoping he would believe.

No doubt the quarrel on Vanheim was orchestrated by him. Asgard was supporting the tribes, just as he desired, and everyone appeared oblivious to his part in all of it.

But she whom High Lord Bjarte did not take into consideration was Frigga’s singular hope in preserving her family.
Darcy Lewis was to play no small part in this war.

Frigga hated putting her in harm’s way with every fiber in her being. The young girl had come to mean so much to the Allmother; she was the daughter she’d never had. While Loki was heir to her magical skill and Thor the legatee of her love, Darcy was to be her political successor. But that was years away. For now, a mortal girl with wide, trusting eyes and such a bright mind should not have to go through such a plight, especially when she did not know the predicament in its entirety. But there was no other way. Not without putting Loki in more danger than he was already in.

There was only so much information Frigga could give her and only so much she could be taught. It concerned Frigga, not that Darcy would not be able to stop Lord Bjarte, in that she was confident, but rather the price at which she did.

Darcy was clever; Frigga would even dare to call her wise considering her youth. It was not reasonable to believe that Darcy would put Bjarte in his place without discovering the truth of Loki’s heritage in the process.

The Queen’s worried gaze swept over the two again, this time lingering on Loki.

She did not understand why fate had chosen to be so cruel to her son. As a child he wanted nothing more than to be as of little worry possible. Both her sons were proud in their own ways. While Thor was always the one to wear his heart on his sleeve, acting on impulse and being forward with his every emotion, Loki was reserved. He spoke quietly and although his words were prudent, they were not hesitant.

She thought back to him as a small child, and his determination and ambition. Never had Frigga known a child to be like Loki. He was so thoughtful, yet rarely shared the happenings in his mind with anyone, not even her. Frigga was sure he confided in her the most out of everyone on Asgard, but she hardly knew what to make of him most of the time. Loki tended to stray off into his own little world where he would stay secluded until he was forced to come out.

The only person he’d truly let in was his advisor, and he’d been pushing her away since their last great escapade.

The rift in their friendship was mending, though far too slowly for Frigga’s taste. It was clear in the glances they stole at one another that they had made their true feelings known.

Frigga did not have to even guess as to why that was.

Darcy Lewis was a painfully sincere character. Even if she tried to lie, the truth shone on her face like a beacon of honesty. Even her emotions, which lit up her features in colorful blushes and animated expressions, could not stay hidden. Loki was very much the same; though he tried, and failed, to keep his feelings secret, his eyes betrayed him. Of course Frigga knew Loki’s title was mostly an exaggeration of his manor of teasing playfulness, mischief, lies, and chaos. Even so, they tended to be the foundation of most of his problems.

The barrier between him and Darcy was a lie.

Not exactly deceit, but rather the absence of truth. He was not being honest with her about what had happened to him in the galaxy. It was not Frigga’s place to tell her. Loki was not ready yet, for the experience had damaged him in ways he’d been unprepared for. As a mother, Frigga feared he may never be prepared.

At last, she exhaled deeply, glaring seriously at her adolescent children. “The Battle of Vanaheim
is upon us. The call of power and glory hail to Asgardian ears like the song of the Valkyrie. I know
that both of you have primed as we’ve been anticipating this war for a few years now. But you
must promise me that you will be on guard at all times.”

Darcy nodded, casting a wary glance at Loki. “Of course, Allmother.”

Loki responded in kind, bowing his head only slightly. “Yes, Mother.”

Jörmungandr and Fenrir seemed to agree as well, taking protective stances around their friends and
each other. Frigga couldn’t look at them without smiling a little. “Advisor Darcy, would you give
me a moment alone with my son?”

The little lady curtsied, accepting dismissal graciously, but her eyes lingered on Loki’s in a
moment of silent communication before she left.

Loki frowned at his friend’s departure, though he refrained from saying anything to her. He faced
Frigga calmly and with far too much attentiveness for him to be listening without ulterior motive.
“Yes, Mother?”

Frigga smiled kindly, stepping towards the scrying pool in the middle of her chambers. The water
was clear and smooth like glass, stirring under the surface were a myriad of colors and shapes that
only she could see. She errantly ran her finger along the rim of the basin, pleased with the image
that made itself apparent. It wasn’t detailed or profound; the vision was just a glimpse of her two
sons. Both were a little taller, their hair longer and their bodies thicker with muscle. Laughter was
clear on their faces and Frigga committed the small sight to memory as she turned to Loki once
more.

“The future is a fickle thing.” She told him cheerily, forcing back a grin at the surprise on his face.

Frigga did not know the details of what had happened to Loki and Darcy on their trip outside the
galaxy. Based on Darcy’s attitude following and Loki’s sudden determination to conquer the
impossible, she had come to the conclusion that her son had somehow become privy to fate’s
secrets.

He quickly tried to recover his shock at her knowledge. Really, she thought it was cute. Did he not
know that attempting to keep these things from her was fruitless?

“I am sure it is.”

Frigga shot him a knowing look over her shoulder. “Come now, Loki. I remember the first time I
felt the Seiðr.” She idly tapped the scrying pool’s surface, causing hundreds of ripples to dance
over the water. “I saw a woman with black hair and eyes that could have held all of Yggdrasil.”

Though Loki had aged physically, his curiosity was just as strong as ever it had been. His questions
were almost palpable as he patiently waited for her to continue. She’d withheld telling him very
much about the seiðr, the most mystical component of magic that existed outside one’s own being.
One could not project seiðr, for it did not come from one’s own self. It could only be channeled by
those chosen to do so.

Loki would not be chosen. It was not a choice of worth or capability, but rather character. While
her youngest son was gifted magically and possessed more skill in his craft than so many before
him, it was clear that he would deal poorly with knowledge of the future.

He said nothing and Frigga continued her story with a sigh. “It confused me at first, as this vision
was not something that my mind had conjured on its own. My imagination is vast, but it is not
Loki had reached the point he always came to, where his questions could no longer go unanswered. Of course, he did so with an air of casualness that differed so greatly from Thor’s quick, passionate words. “What was the vision?”

“Unimportant.” Frigga said, remembering the woman fondly. “I like to think that she and I have a relationship of sorts, although I’m sure that’s not true. You see, I spent so long searching for her. As a young girl on Vanaheim, I went out of my way to meet new people, hoping for just a peek of this woman. I became obsessed with her and with my vision.”

There was a beat of silence as Frigga focused on the swirling colors in the pool.

“I spent years thinking about her, dreaming of her, making up a name and a life for her. Was she a sorceress or a warrior? Did she have a family? Did she enjoy strawberries in the summertime? She haunted me, the mystery woman. Even as the sight came to me more frequently, I wasted countless hours on her.

“But,” Frigga paused, thinking back on the torture of not knowing before she’d trained herself to cope with the future properly. “The day I agreed to let your father court me, I stopped. It occurred to me that I could not hurry the future. It will happen in time. We mustn’t dwell on what will be.”

Loki turned towards the window and she watched as he plunged deeper into thought.

Frigga had to wonder what he’d seen, what he’d heard, that worried him so much. What had brought her smart little prince to the state he was in?

Finally, he spoke with measured, well thought-out words. “The universe is infinite.”

“Quite.” Frigga agreed, awaiting the rest of his statement.

“It grows continuously,” Loki said, tracing a thin line of golden magic through the air. In an instant, it became a fat blossomed peony, so sharp in scent that Frigga could detect its presence from where she stood across the room. “And yet,” he stopped talking as the flower wilted. The stunning bloom decayed as the petals fell away in a sprinkle of golden light, his illusion falling apart most beautifully. “it is not eternal.”

“Did you expect it to be?” Frigga asked lightly, “Everything dies Loki, in one way or another.”

“I am aware.” He pursed his lips tightly, glaring at the Asgardian skyline. “But what if the death, the fall of something great…of someone magnificent was meant to be preserved? If it were foretold that the loss would be prevented by means of discovery?”

She studied him for a second, “What would be discovered and who, or what, would be saved?”

“Unimportant.” He echoed her earlier response, giving the horizon a hard look. “Especially considering your question was redundant. You need not keep up the pretense that what I speak of is news to you.”

Frigga, taken back by Loki’s sudden coldness, stepped towards him, abandoning her pool to comfort her youngest son. “Don’t be silly, darling. I don’t know everything.”

“But this you know.” He clarified and Frigga conceded with a sigh.

“I know that you are gone night after night in search of powerful gems, looking in places you are
well aware they could never be. You are recklessly risking your life out of fear and desperation. You have become separated from your dearest friend, though it is apparent you miss her. If those are not signs of an unhappy glance into the future, I do not know what are.” Frigga said candidly, as Loki’s eyes betrayed his every emotion.

He did not give in. Loki was stubborn to his very core, just as he was as a child. He never shared any pieces of the puzzle until he had them neatly fit together in proper order. “What is it you expect of me?”

Frigga squeezed his arm comfortably and he leaned into her touch ever so slightly. “I take it you have not told Darcy of these future events that will come to play?”

His silence was answer enough.

“Loki…”

He turned to her sharply, “How could I tell her this? Mother, I am meant to safeguard this and every realm from the end of ends. To tell Darcy would be to ensure that I am never able to do that.”

She took his outburst calmly, responding in a soothing tone as tension drained from his stiff body. “Must that be true? Finding these stones as you believe you must and has been prophesized that you will, it is as fate would have it. You cannot rush the future, Loki.”

The force in her words quieted him as he retreated once more into his thoughts. When he emerged again, his voice was soft. “She would be angry.”

“Angrier than she no doubt already is?”

His brow furrowed and he shook his head, “I do not know.”

Frigga considered him for a moment. Why should he be so hesitant to tell Darcy of what happened to him? Why would he go through such pains to keep her in the dark?

Then it occurred to her, as if by another sense ingrained in her as a mother; Loki was scared. He hid it well - he always had.

“There is more to this that I do not know.” Frigga stated, her mind racing ahead of her. Really, how much trouble had Loki managed to get himself into? Furthermore, how was she going to get him out of it? She was never one for assassinations or murder, but she could negotiate.

She expected him to prevaricate longer before confessing, but was surprised when he answered her almost in earnest. “Mother, I have made a grave mistake.”

“I see.” She said, pondering his tone. “What is it you’ve done?”

“I…”Loki began, trailing off uncertainly, the tops of his cheeks a pale pink. Frigga cocked her head curiously to the side, as it was most unlike Loki to stumble over his words.

“Darcy, she…I…we…” he tried again, kneading his brow. “Oh gods.”

Frigga’s heart nearly stopped with sudden realization, “Loki, is Darcy with child?”

His eyes widened in shock, his expression morphing into that of complete mortification. “No! Of course not! Mother, Darcy and I do not, nor have we ever—“
Frigga, thoroughly humored and relieved, choked back a few titters at Loki’s indignation. “My apologies. I should not have made assumptions about your relationship with Darcy. I understand that it is completely platonic.”

Loki grit his teeth, “Ah, but therein lies my dilemma, Mother.”

“Oh?” she inquired as he stared distractedly out the window at a passing longship.

“I love her and she, me.”

“Really?” Frigga asked, nonplussed. “Is that all?”

“How do you mean?” Loki asked, clearly taken back.

She shook her head, taking her son’s hand kindly. “Darling, this is not news to me.”

“You have foreseen it?”

“Everyone has foreseen it.” She clarified, patting his cheek. “But it pleases me that the both of you have caught on. However, I do not see why this newly discovered love should impede the truth? If you love her, should you not tell her of whatever it is that is keeping you away?”

“Mother, the reasons are endless as to why I should not tell her. I love her, but she is mortal—”

“Horse shit.” Frigga interrupted, “Darling, I understand that you worry for her, but this is ridiculous. She has a right to know; not to mention it is in your best interest to tell her. Friendship is one of the most valuable things we have in the world. Focusing your energy on preserving Yggdrasil now is a waste, the time has not come. You cannot prevent a prophecy.”

Loki studied her thoughtfully for a moment. In his eyes lay the truth; he knew very well that she was right. But there was something else…

Frigga gently squeezed his wrist, “Loki, heed my words. The future will not come any sooner.”

Loki was not having visions, but prophecies and predictions could be just as dangerous to those unequipped to cope with them.

“Tell her what you’ve seen.” Frigga commanded in a motherly tone. “She deserves to know.”

Nodding once, he clasped his hands behind his back. “I will.”

No sooner had he agreed then there was a quick knock at the door. Before Frigga could respond, Thor was stepping inside, his entire being alight with boyish excitement. Mjolnir in hand and armor newly fitted, he was a true Aesir prince, ready for battle.

“Mother!” he greeted, stepping forwards to kiss her cheek, “You sent for me.”

Frigga smiled, her conflicting emotions giving way to the sight of her son’s happiness. She hated war, especially this one. But battle was an Asgardian rite, sacred in some regards. While Thor had fought his whole life in the training fields, brawled his way through nightly fights, and talked of glory, he had yet to lead men and win. He was still, in Aesir eyes, a boy, yet to prove himself a man.

His time would come, but Frigga had the feeling that war would not make a man out of him.

Folding her hands before her, Frigga acknowledged her two sons, fearing the worst. She would do
the most she could in this war, to prevent the terrible truth from being told.

Ever so gently, Frigga stepped forwards to take her sons into a soft embrace, catching them off guard. Young boys were so resilient to showing affectionate. Loki had been less so, but Thor and the other boys teased him for being the weaker of the bunch. But he was coming to the age where it mattered less, and they quickly wrapped his arms around her.

Frigga indulged in the moment, feeling, for once in her life, old. Had it really been that long ago that Loki was learning his first spell? Or that Thor was taking his first steps? At one point, she worried about letting them eat too much sugar before bed and now she was sending them off to war.

At last, she released them, staring first into Loki’s green eyes, imagining the red color hidden beneath the illusion. Then she looked to Thor’s blue ones, thinking that two races were not truly so different.

She often contemplated telling Loki the truth, to be free of the burden of lying to him about his true identity. But to do so would kill him. With all the hate he had towards the Frost Giants, discovering his heritage would tear him apart. It was too late to come out of this lie painlessly. The price of dishonesty had bled from the royal family into the good of the realm and expanded into Yggdrasil. Lord Bjarte had made sure of that.

Sighing, Frigga shook the thoughts away, avoiding them just a little longer. For now, she must focus on the immediate threats to her family and realm.

Loki’s brow creased, his hands settling on her shoulders. “Are you well, Mother?”

“And of course,” she answered, cupping his cheek in her palm. “It is so very strange to see the little boys you raise grow into men.

“Promise me you’ll look after one another.” She demanded, her throat thick. She did not like to dabble in the practice of questioning what could be. But, in that moment, with Thor staring down at her like she was being silly with concern, and Loki squeezing her hand in a promise he would try to keep, it was impossible not to question whether or not this would be the last time she ever saw them like this.

If Bjarte somehow managed to reveal the truth before he was stopped, then Loki would be lost. Thor and Loki would have to protect one another to unknowingly keep the secret safe.

Darcy would have to put an end to the battle that Frigga had been unable to contain while it was still a matter of words rather than blood.

“I swear it, Mother.” Thor promised with an air of nonchalance, clapping Loki on the shoulder. “Some poor soul has to keep Loki out of trouble!”

Loki narrowed his eyes, jerking his shoulder from his brother’s grip. “Indeed. Though, I wonder if I will be enough to keep my oaf of a brother from disgracing Asgard.”

“I am the disgrace?” Thor asked hotly, “It was not I who is rumored to have taken most of the Asgardian court to bed, men withstanding.”

Loki gave a purely innocent look that told Frigga everything she needed to know about how much mischief he was capable of. “All rumors I assure you. Although, it would delight you to know that I’ve recently become privy to the knowledge that more of the maids have been acquainted with his
highness’ hammer.”

Frigga let her head fall into her hand as her sons bickered on.

“Must you be so obtuse? I only meant to jest!”

“Ah, of course. Forgive me, I thought it was your intention to enlighten Mother on the nature of our private lives.”

“If I intended to do that I would have mentioned Darcy.”

“If you dare—“

“—not to mention the incident at breakfast—“

“—a magical miscalculation—“

“It took me the day to wash berries from my beard!”

“You never looked better. The elderberries brought out the color of your eyes.”

Frigga sighed loudly and cleared her throat, but they continued.

 “…really Thor, surely you must know that we, as princes of Asgard, share the command of Asgard’s warriors.”

“There is a difference between the leader written in ink and the leader the warriors chose. Naturally they will follow my command!”

“Why? Because you are dull enough to wield a blunt object and have enough magic in your veins to endure a spark of lightning?”

“Because you know nothing of leading! You can defend yourself, but you have relationship with any of the men!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. As you mentioned before, I am not unfamiliar—“

“It was a jest! I did not think the rumors were true!”

Having heard enough, Frigga intervened. “Enough.”

Immediately, her sons quieted, both uttering their apologies. Thor was irritated, Loki was smirking. Perhaps she spoke too soon about them becoming men.

“Keep yourselves out of trouble. While you share the command, bear in mind that wisdom lies beyond your own mind. Do not undermine the council of those around you.” Frigga reminded them seriously.

Thor patted her hand reassuringly, “All will be fine, Mother! You needn’t worry. Loki and I will settle this skirmish and earn Asgard glory once again!”

Loki glared daggers at his brother, remaining silent while Thor’s words filled her with dread. “Go. Rest. Enjoy this day in peace before tomorrow morn.” She dismissed them good naturedly, embracing them both again before they left.

May the gods have pity on her soul.
Johnny set down his wrench, satisfied with the tune-up on his motorbike. It was the first day of summer, he was officially a high school graduate, and he was headed to college in the fall.

Most of his friends were either started with their summer jobs or planning trips with together. Many were commemorating the last months of their high school relationships before the inevitable parting in the fall.

As much as Johnny wanted the summer with Darcy, he knew they wouldn’t make it, and he knew why.

If someone were to look at his life, they would see that it was very similar to those of his friends. He had a summer job working in a mechanic shop and planned to spend his free time at the stunt arena. Now that he was eighteen, they would let him in. He graduated, maybe with better grades than most, but less care for his studies and more for the next time he was getting laid. Everything about him seemed…normal in a sense.

That is, until Darcy came into the picture.

His girlfriend was the outlier in the kind of life he lived.

It was difficult for him to see at first. Before, Johnny was so enamored by her. Darcy was so different from anyone he’d ever known. She was beautiful and free and he loved that about her. But over the past few months, after fucking her and almost admitting he loved her several times over, Johnny realized how very different he and Darcy were.

He loved her, but he wasn’t in love with her like he originally thought. And it was for that reason that he believed they were going to break up.

He didn’t want to be the one to do it. Their relationship was probably one of the most stable things in his life and looking at Darcy gave him hope that the feeling he felt so prominently at the beginning of their time together still remained.

The sound of an approaching bicycle drew him from his thoughts and Johnny looked up from his work to see none other than Darcy Lewis in shorts and a t-shirt, dismounting her bike at the end of his driveway.

Johnny turned off his music as she approached. He smiled a little bit as he acknowledged her baggy t-shirt and jean cut-offs. At first he thought maybe she was just having a lazy day because usually Darcy liked to dress up a little more before she went out. She’d recently bought a nice collection of summer dresses that she’d been excited to wear. But she was dressed sloppily.

She wore flip-flops, her hair was pulled into a messy bun, her glasses sat crooked on her nose and she looked frantic. He watched as she composed herself a little before walking to his garage. Despite her anxious attitude, she took her time getting to him.

“Hey Lewis.” He greeted once she was close enough. “What’s up?”

Darcy quirked a tiny grin, though he could tell it took more effort than it ought. “Johnny, hi.” She said, eyes dropping to his motorcycle as if it might have the words she needed to say written across the seat.

Johnny cleared his throat, picking up a rag and wiping some of the grease from his hands on it. “Darce? You good?”
She sighed, shoving her hands in her pockets, looking away from him. “Johnny, don’t take this the wrong way, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Because I like you.” Darcy rushed on, her words terribly concise as she prattled on. “I like you a lot. You’re super pretty and you’re not bad in the sack and you make me laugh which I’m really glad for because you started dating me at a very weird time in my life. I’ve been really unfair to you. I mean, I haven’t cheated on you or been flirting with anyone or anything like that. I just… I think I communicated my feelings wrong to some extent? Is that a good way to put it? And it sucks because I really like our relationship, but—“

“I love you, Darcy Lewis.” Johnny said, finally saying the words he’d struggled to choke out for so long. Only they weren’t a struggle anymore. He did love her. But, a bro kinda love…if he ever had sex with any of his bros.

Darcy’s eyebrows went to her hairline and she made a face. “Okay, you see, you just made this a whole lot harder because—“

“We should break up.” He interrupted, putting aside his rag as he toyed with a few parts. He met Darcy’s shocked, yet relieved, expression with a small smile. “Don’t get me wrong, babe, you’re the best I’ve ever had the privilege of dating. I love you. But…” he hesitated. “…you deserve more than me.”

Darcy made a face. “Who are you and what have you done with Johnny Storm?”

He held up his hands defensively. “Yeah, yeah, I know. That was literally the cheesiest fucking thing I could have said.” He plucked at his wife-beater, suddenly feeling very warm. “What I meant was, you’re great Darcy, but I’m not the right guy for you. And, as much as it would be totally awesome, I don’t think you’re the right girl for me.”

“I guess I feel the same way.” She played with the fringe on her shorts, “I mean, you’re going away to college too. Plenty of fine ladies and less fine alcohol.”

Johnny chuckled, scratching the sweaty back of his neck, “Yeah. I guess so.”

There was a long stretch of silence when Darcy looked at him, almost apologetically. “I’ll miss you, Hotshot.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

“Oh I know you will.” She said, winking sassily. “I’ll see you around, Johnny Storm.”

Exhaling deeply, he watched Darcy walk away, getting probably the nicest view of her ass in shorts he would ever have the benefit of seeing. “You’ll be the one that got away, Lewis.”

She shot him a wide grin over her shoulder as she pedaled off into the late morning, her hair falling out of its bun as she rode. Johnny had the funny feeling that he would see her again. Darcy Lewis just didn’t seem like the kind of girl to disappear.

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“Darcy, are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Ms. Lewis asked as Darcy helped her move bags to the front of the house while her father packed a cooler. “We could make this a family road-trip. Just the three of us from here to California!”
Darcy shuddered at the thought of sitting for hours on end with her parents in their mini-van as they went cross-country to go visit Darius in LA. Her parents were celebrating him landing a job working for Stark Industries.

“I’m sure mom.” Darcy panted, heaving one of the massive duffle bags from her shoulder. “You guys have fun.”

Her mother frowned, setting a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “But you know we would have more fun if you went with us. What’s keeping you here, Darcy?”

Darcy set down the other bag, raising her eyebrows. “You want the list?”

Emma Lewis sighed heavily, straightening her posture and closing her eyes as if she was to receive a blow. “Yes. Go ahead. Tell me the list.”

Grinning, Darcy began. “Well, first of all, I hate car rides and dad knows every terrible dad-joke ever. Plus, you guys only listen to bad country music about trucks and beer and girlfriends.”

Her mom nodded her head from side to side, “Very true.”

“Secondly,” Darcy said, pulling a list from her back pocket to check that her parents had everything they needed for their trip. “You’re going to California to visit Darius and support his choice to work for Stark Industries.”

“Oh, not this again.” Her mother sighed exasperatedly, “Darcy, it’s a good job. At the rate he’s going, he’ll be able to pay off his college debt in no time. We should be proud of him! He graduated early and then immediately was employed by Stark!”

“And that would be great!” Darcy argued, “If not for the fact that Tony Stark should be convicted of several terrorist crimes.”

“Darcy! This is about Darius, not Tony Stark!”

“Everything is always about Tony Stark!” Darcy protested, throwing her hands up. “Stop thinking like a capitalist for two seconds! The man can’t make that much money just by selling weapons to the US Military. He’s smart, yeah. But he can’t see past all that genius, that or he doesn’t care to try. I know my shit, Mom. One day, all of this is going to bite Stark Industries in the ass and I will be there to laugh when it does. I don’t care how much money Darius is making working for Mr. Stark, I will not support it.”

Ms. Lewis crossed her arms, “Are you finished?”

“Not at all.” Darcy confirmed, calming down a bit. “But I can move onto the next thing on the list if you like.”

“Please.”

“There’s no internet in the car.”

Ms. Lewis laughed at her daughter’s ridiculousness and pulled her into a hug. “I’ll miss you, Darce. We’ll be gone most of the summer, you know that? I’m sure Fenrir would want to go.”

Darcy smiled weakly, her heart sinking in her chest as she hugged her mother tighter. Of course she couldn’t tell them the biggest reason she wasn’t going or why she was holding onto her mother like she would never see her again.
She’d woken up early that morning on Asgard, prepared to go about her day, when Frigga called her to her chambers bearing news that the war with Vanaheim had been announced and Odin intended to send troops out the next morning. She requested that Darcy go to Vanaheim to prevent the worst from happening.

Darcy was still clueless as to what the Queen meant by this, but she agreed to go nonetheless as she’d planned.

No sooner had Frigga shared her news than Loki magically appeared, frenzied in every sense of the word. He looked tired and sad, but he was not quite on edge as he was prior to their last real conversation.

He and Darcy hardly done much talking since their last major argument. Every talk of theirs since had been little more than heated bickering. Although he wasn’t ignoring her like he had been before. They walked together on the way to meetings that Loki was slowly beginning to attend again. They never said very much to one another, for they had nothing to say. Darcy was beyond angry, but she was also wrought with concern. She found herself looking at him more often than not, searching him out in a crowd, finding his eyes and holding onto them, wordlessly asking if he was okay. It was her silent invitation for him to come back to her.

That morning was no different. They stared at one another, caught up in all the things they would say, all the things they would do, if circumstances were different. But Loki’s message was simple enough.

It was unfair to the both of them to be together when Loki was out risking his life for absurd reasons.

Even so, Loki took her hand and she stepped closer to him without question. He brought her home and she asked him to stay in her room until she returned. He agreed and Darcy hurriedly changed her clothes, heading out to tie up any loose ends. She wrote a letter to Grace who was at a backpacking trip in Utah, and then she went to break up with Johnny.

Honestly, it had been coming since the moment she admitted her feelings for Loki. It was apparent over the last few months of their relationship that, as nice as the sex was, the chemistry just wasn’t there. She couldn’t make herself fall in love with Johnny Storm anymore than she could convince Fenrir that he was not a snake (She’d tried once and it confused him something awful).

Now she just had to say goodbye to her parents and have them deliver a hug to Darius for her. She didn’t expect to die in battle, but if she did, she wanted the people she loved on Earth to know that she cared for them.

At this point her dad came inside and just the sight of him in his khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirt made her want to cry. “Hey, Kiddo, it’s not too late to come with us.”

Darcy shook her head, letting go of her mother to give her dad a hug. “Nah, Dad. You guys have fun.”

He ruffled her hair as it had fallen out of its bun a while ago and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Don’t throw any massive parties while we’re gone. I measured exactly how much alcohol I have left. If there are any more than two servings missing from each bottle, we’re having a talk.”

“Michal!” Ms. Lewis criticized, slapping her husband on the shoulder lightly. He chuckled in response, picking up the two duffel bags and heading for the car.
“Love you, Darce. I’m really going to miss you, Fenrir!” he called and the dog at Darcy’s side whined, wagging his tail.

Mrs. Lewis kissed her daughter goodbye, reminding her to use her credit card when she needed more groceries and if the car stopped running for whatever reason, she had her bicycle and a mechanic’s number. Darcy was pretty sure Loki would be able to fix the car faster than any Midgardian mechanic, but she didn’t tell her mom that.

Fenrir barked once as they drove away and Darcy felt especially empty.

“Come on, Fen.” She said, turning around and walking slowly up the stairs. She didn’t even pause before opening her door.

Loki sat on the edge of her bed, a book propped open in his lap. He cast it away at her entrance. Darcy perched herself beside him, her breathing surprisingly even. There was a long stretch of silence that, with anyone else, would have been awkward. But with Loki, it was soothing. Loki was safety and home. She didn’t need to say anything, she only needed him to be there.

Frank slithered onto her lap, his head resting on her knee as he made sounds at Fenrir. The corners of Darcy’s mouth twitched as she stroked his back.

“You need not go, Darcy.” Loki said quietly, holding out his hand for Frank to lick his thumb. “My mother would understand if you did not want to.”

Darcy shook her head, gently stretching out her fingers to touch Loki’s outstretched palm. “This is my war as much as it is anyone else’s. Besides, I won’t be fighting. Not really. I don’t have the qualifications.”

Asgard was fairly strict when it came to war.

The law decreed that anyone, man or woman, could go to war so long as they were an adolescent or older. Since Asgard was a war-culture society, it was assumed that most people volunteering to fight for their realm knew a thing or two about wielding a weapon.

However, this law backfired during the war against the dark elves. Too many Asgardian citizens without proper training were going into battle and ultimately a lot of people lost their lives. Young men were too eager to prove themselves and to earn a name for their families; they charged the elves with outdated armor and a weapon they’d barely trained with.

New laws were put in before the Great War. Odin believed strongly that everyone should have the opportunity to prove themselves during battle. Anyone could fight, but they could not be on the front lines. Inexperienced warriors were required to be in small contingents consisting of at least one trained warrior.

Even though Darcy had trained and even though she was Loki’s Advisor, Hervingr, General of the King’s Army and First Einherjar, declared that she was unprepared for battling alongside a Prince.

It was an act of spite. Hervingr didn’t really like Darcy to begin with. But after her and Loki’s proposal to change the weaponry, he’d set a personal vendetta against her.

Loki, being a prince, read Hervingr’s decree and dismissed it, writing back and saying that Darcy was to stay by his side at all times. Darcy was almost pissed off by that.

Who was Loki to demand that she be in his sight during the war when he was gallivanting about, searching for Infinity Stones without her even knowing which realm he was on?
Of course, it was difficult because she did want Loki in her sight. Lord Bjarte had something planned and Darcy had the sickest feeling it was something to do with Loki. She needed to be near him.

Hervingr clearly did not see it this way, as he then sent out a petition to several political figures of various ranking to deny Darcy her place beside Loki. Atop the list was Tyr’s advisor, Verig.

The petition surpassed any royal word, save the Allfather. But Darcy wasn’t about to go ask Odin for anything.

That left Darcy with her low rank as a soldier, separate from Loki who, because of his princely status, would be leading warriors through the heat of the battle with Thor. Odin made it perfectly clear that he was not going and it would be his son’s responsibility to bring Vanaheim peace.

Originally, Odin’s decision was that Asgard choose no side and simply beat all of the warring Vanir into submission. No sooner after he sent out the letters announcing his decision, then a second came, declaring that they would instead be fighting with the tribes.

Darcy was pleased with this news, though remained skeptical of Lord Bjarte.

That man had something wretched up his sleeve and Darcy couldn’t place it. She’d begged Frigga for more information, but the Queen claimed she could not give her anymore without putting the young lady in jeopardy.

Darcy pointed out that jeopardy wasn’t so bad, but Frigga wouldn’t hear it. She only gave instruction to be on her guard and to beware of treason.

But the Allmother had asked her something. She requested a favor from Darcy to protect her sons. Thor, from making faulty commands and Loki, from himself and all that he cannot take on his own.

Did Frigga know that Darcy was literally the lowest rank she could be on the field? Did she know that she wouldn’t even be in proximity to Lord Bjarte? Did she know that Loki was legitimately the most frustrating person to try and look after? He wouldn’t even give her a straight answer as to why he felt so obligated to find Infinity Stones.

But Frigga’s concern scared Darcy. Even when Darcy and Loki were children, the Queen had not been overly worried for their health in the short battle with Nornheim. This time around, Frigga was frightened. And if Frigga was frightened, Darcy should be as well.

“Do you remember the first time we went to battle?” Loki asked suddenly, breaking the long stretch of silence they’d fallen into.

Darcy smiled, her soul laden with melancholy as she thought back to before. “Yeah. You made my armor and did my hair as we finalized our grand-master plan to kick ass.”

“We were amateurs.” Loki pointed out, turning his head only slightly to peek at her from under his lashes.

She bumped him with her shoulder. “We were kids! It couldn’t have been too bad. I mean, it worked.”

Loki let his attention drift back down to Fenrir, his brow furrowing. “We understood so little. Our solution to avoiding conflict was to blind either side.”
“Yep.” Darcy agreed, thinking back fondly. “You were super cute back then. Like a cute, fluffy animal.”

Loki adorned a hurt expression, facing her completely. “Are you suggesting that I am no longer a cute animal?”

“Well…” Darcy said, tilting her head in thought as she studied his face. Her gaze followed the length of his nose and the curve of his lips, the arch of his brow and the hollow of his cheek. After a moment, she realized her examination had surpassed scrutiny and moved onto staring. She cleared her throat, “You could be. You’ve got the hair for it.”

He scowled and Darcy laughed freely for a moment, lost in being with him. Their relationship was so easy, yet so painfully complicated. The stones that had come between them were not worth their friendship.

The thought of their separation, their distance and coldness towards one another quickly vanished her laughter. She breathed deeply, trying not to dwell on her concern. Frigga had not stopped Loki from going off on his own before. But, with the oncoming war, she had asked a mortal to protect the God of Mischief.

Softly, Loki pushed a messy lock of hair behind her ear, his palm cradling her cheek. “What troubles you, Darcy?”

She didn’t respond right away, leaning into his touch and kissing his palm. “I’m scared, Loki.”

“But you are formidable, Darling.” Loki said reassuringly, his words bringing a tiny smile to her lips. “You are the invincible Sword Queen.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle a little, a tear trekking down her face nonetheless. Loki wiped it away with the pad of his thumb. She met his eyes, letting the truth slip from her just as soon as it made itself known to her.

“I don’t want to die not being your friend.” Darcy admitted, holding his hand to her face. “Or vice versa.”

“Darcy—“

“Forget about the Infinity Stones.” Darcy said abruptly, squeezing his fingers hard enough to hurt a mortal. Conflict flashed in his eyes as he internally disputed with himself. But Darcy hadn’t finished with her request. “Just for today.” She pleaded, giving in. There was no point in them being divided now. Not when it could be the end for both of them. “Spend the day with me. I don’t care where we go or what we do. Just be mine for the day.”

“Darcy,” Loki said her name through an incredulous smile, “You ask as if I could ever say no. I am yours entirely.”

His confession made her heart throb in the very best of ways and she considered grabbing his face and kissing him right then and there. But she restrained herself. If she kissed him now, there would be no turning back. If they made it out of this war unscathed and Loki went right back to chasing magic rocks, she would suffer all the more for it.

So, instead of planting her mouth on his and letting sweet victory grow in her soul, she stood. Frank wrapped himself excitedly around her waist, his head settling on her shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Loki followed her up, his eyes brighter than they’d been in a very long time. “Where to, Milady?”
“Asgard.” She directed, grinning at the feel of his magic washing over her to change her shorts and t-shirt into a comfortable, summery blue dress that matched her eyes. “No meetings, no messages or lessons. I’m taking a day.”

A grin graced his sharp features as he tugged her closer unexpectedly. “As you wish.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, “Oh my god, you’re still a fucking dork.”

“You love me for it.” Loki teased, beaming down at her and Darcy returned his smile with a whisper of seriousness.

“You know that I do.”

Ever so softly, he kissed her knuckles. It wasn’t an uncommon thing for him to do in the past. Maybe he would do it in greeting on Asgard or as a casual sign of affection. But this time was different. This little kiss was a promise that Darcy would hold onto for years to come. “And I, you.”

“Just to be clear, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re the dorkiest individual ever to live. That being said, we should totally take a picnic basket with us. Nothing says ‘I’m going to war tomorrow and trying to live my last day in peace’ like a picnic basket.”

And thus began what Darcy would call the most tranquil day she’d had in a year.

They packed a bag full of books Darcy had been meaning to read along with a few bars of chocolate. Hel awaited them in the field outside the portal as if she’d known that today was the day they would travel with her again. She seemed extremely pleased by the fact.

When they arrived back at the palace, Darcy didn’t worry about whether people thought they were together or if they were in a clandestine love affair. At the stables, Loki helped her down from Hel, his hands lingering on her waist.

They held hands on the way to the gardens and Loki conjured a large green blanket under a willow tree. The draping leaves and branches obscured them from view. They laughed about nothing and talked about everything. Loki braided her hair for the first time in forever while she read through a history book recounting interesting facts about mortal American presidents.

Eventually, Loki did conjure them a picnic basket and they fed each other chocolate covered strawberries. Because what is a picnic without chocolate covered strawberries anyways?

Darcy lost track of time after that. She sat between Loki’s long legs as he leaned against the tree, her back to his chest, comparing their hand sizes while he recalled several of their adventures from the past. Frank and Fenrir lounged about, drifting in and out of sleep.

When she was close to dozing off, wrapped up in Loki’s arms, her bare feet caught in a ray of sunlight that peeked through the willow leaves, she asked him to do ‘the thing’.

He hesitated, for it had been so very long since he’d shared himself magically with her and for a moment, Darcy wondered if she’d gone too far. That’s when it happened.

From the start she could tell his magic had manifested immensely over the past six months. Though he was very gentle, Darcy could feel his power. But there was so much more to him than just that. It was not hard to tell how much he’d been hurt since they parted. She couldn’t tell who had stricken him, or whether each blow was mental or physical.
Sentiment coursed through her as she closed her eyes and felt him. Someone had harmed her Loki; damaged him and left him to bleed. She hoped, if they lived through the war, that he might tell her. Now was not the time to dwell on the bad. Darcy only snuggled closer and focused on connecting with him, wishing with all her heart that she could reciprocate.

She awaited the dreadful moment when he would pull away and withdraw his magic from her. But the moment never came.

They stayed together, Darcy immersed in her prince and he in his mortal until their breathing synced, chests rising and falling together, and their hearts beat perfectly in time.

Darcy fell asleep in his embrace, feeling more relaxed than she had in a very long time. Loki woke her up as the sun began to set. Sleepily, Darcy clung to Loki as they left their hiding place to watch the final sunset over the Asgardian skyline, the last of its daytime glow illuminating the bifrost.

They watched until the stars lit up the sky and Darcy felt like it was time for bed.

Hel took them back to the portal and Loki delivered them to Midgard. Darcy almost forgot to let go of his hand when she left for a shower. She made him promise he would stay.

With wet hair and loose pajamas, Darcy made her way back to her room, her every fiber relaxing when she saw Loki standing by her desk in his black linen pants and tunic, pouring what looked like two small glasses of her dad’s scotch.

“Are we drinking?” Darcy asked skeptically, accepting the glass he handed her nonetheless.

“It is customary to drink the night before battle. Not excessively as I’m sure Thor is this evening.” Loki said, brushing damp hair off her shoulder to run his fingers through her brown locks. “Of course, I would not typically choose this particular sort of beverage, but it was between this or that vulgar collection of wine your parents seem so proud of.”

Darcy smirked, “You could have used your magic Loki powers to conjure up some non-Midgardian drinks. Just sayin’.”

“No.” he sighed, swirling his drink. “We spent today on Asgard. We should dedicate the evening to your home realm.”

“If you insist.” Darcy said, raising her glass. “To Earth. May it go on without me during my time away.”

“To Earth.” Loki echoed, clinking his glass against hers. They drank in silence, Loki downing his in a single gulp while Darcy sipped hers.

After the glasses had been magicked away, Darcy crawled into bed, waiting for Loki to join her. When he didn’t come, she sat up to see him hesitantly standing at her bedside.

“You’re still standing.” Darcy accused, poking his thigh. “Sleep. It’s a good thing.”

Loki’s lips twitched, but he didn’t move. He folded his hands, in the midst of great indecision. “I will return for you in the morning.”

Her heart fell and she reached out to him, shifting onto her knees and tugging gently on his wrists. “Loki, don’t go. Not tonight.”

He closed his eyes, brow furrowed. Darcy waited, just as confused as she’d been these last few
months when he pulled away from her. But tonight she would protest again.

There was something off about the war. It scared her. She’d been a part of it nearly every step of the way. She knew that, as far as battles went, it was hardly a monumental fight. She doubted it would go down in history as a second great war between realms. Asgard was unlikely to fight with Vanaheim for very long. It was a wonder they even agreed to assist in the fight as it were.

Even so, Darcy was worried.

With a heavy sigh, Loki took her hands, linking their fingers as he sunk to his knees, kneeling before her.

“I have been unfair to you Darcy.” He said, his head bowed. “These past seasons, I have refrained from telling you the truth.”

Darcy smirked despite the sentimental ache of her heart. Still, she managed light sarcasm. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Loki looked up so she could very clearly see his eye roll. “Darcy…”

“Sorry, but you walked right into that one. I’ll be quiet now.” She promised, letting go of one of his hands to pull shut an imaginary zipper across her lips.

He tried really hard not to smile at her antics, giving her an exasperated glare before his expression morphed into something much graver.

Softly, she cupped his cheek in her palm as silent encouragement. He could talk to her; she was listening.

Green met blue and he pressed a careful kiss to her knuckles before finally speaking. “When we were separated in the galaxy beyond, I saw things I believed to be impossible.”

The gravity of his admittance set a weight in the pit of her stomach and she gripped his hands, trying to pull him up from his knees. But he resisted, squeezing her wrists, demanding her attention to his every word.

“I could feel the strength of the power stone. It was radiant. Quill and I were thousands of miles away and I could feel it. We followed the trace into a city, broken, decayed, ancient… It was the land of the extinct Celestials. Everything about the city was colossal. Not simply in size, but presence. Never have I felt so young.”

Darcy waited on edge for him to continue, anxious for that which damaged him so.

“We came to the center of the city. There was a building, newer. It was apparent the infinity stone lay within. Fenrir and I went inside to retrieve it,” his eyes seemed to gain depth, the shadows beneath them darkening in the muted light of her room. “There was a celestial inside.”

Darcy gasped, unable to help herself. “Alive?”

“Not exactly. It was not dead, though alive is not the word I would use.” He grit his teeth at the memory, his focus unwavering. “It was waiting.”

Darcy was sure he could feel her pulse thundering under his fingertips. Questions surged in her blood, stinging her tongue, yet she was unable to ask them.
“Gods should not make things so magnificent. It spoke to me…” He hesitated, voice soft.

“Loki,” she interrupted in a whisper, “you don’t have to say.”

Ignoring her, he went on, “It recited a prophecy of me. It called me unbelievable.”

“Loki…”

He held her hands even tighter, to the point of pain, his eyes burning with intensity as he recited the prophecy in Celestian:

“It recites a prophecy…a disguised man…a liar…a prince of two lands…

Born again by mother’s blood, a liar with love for the law…falling, falling, dropped by raven’s claw.

The mad…the mad grows his madness, break his chest and fill it with wretchedness, freed only by death’s sadness.

Set free your beasts, the end of all ends be it the case, Chaos holds soul, power, reality, mind, time and space, save the living race.

Might will fight and Might might fall, thunder’s clash save them all.

Queens and Mothers win the war, carry love worth fighting for.

To the little one, seek and seek. Promise to you, he will not be weak.

Behold, The Insignificant savior, bring glory to those who wear it better. Behold, The Shadow.”

Darcy was speechless, her mind flooded with the prophecy. A liar? A disguised man? Chaos? All spoke of Loki’s title. But she wondered if the person who spoke the prophecy had known who Loki really was. A prince of two lands? Loki was prince of one land. Asgard.

“It gave me the stone before turning to dust.” Loki finished bitterly, his tone leaving a sour taste in her mouth. “Quill and I returned to the ship before the world blew to bits.”

She stared at him, overcome with everything he’d kept from her. She hadn’t expected this. Knowing Loki, he wouldn’t handle the future too well. These past months, he’d been suffering, stressing over a few words, trying to take on the responsibility of the universe. Her Loki.

“Come on, Lokes.” She urged quietly, pulling up on his arms. When he didn’t budge, she slipped off the edge of her bed, squeezing herself between Loki’s chest and her bed frame. She knelt before him, her feet going underneath her bed as she settled her palms on his chest.

“You are not a shadow.” She told him, every fiber of her being emanating truth. “You are significant. Whatever this prophecy is, it’s about the future. It’ll happen no matter what you do. There’s no need to rush into it. You could be immortal, Loki. You have time.”

She threaded her fingers in his hair, pushing the black locks behind his ears.

His eyes were wide and unguarded, “Are you not angry?”

Darcy heaved a frustrated sigh, “Jesus Christ, Loki. I was angry that I didn’t know what was going on before.” She ran her thumb along the length of his cheekbone. “Yeah, I think you overreacted a bit by not talking to me after a very traumatic experience for us both, and yeah I’m a little bit pissed
that you didn’t tell me sooner. There’s a lot of this that I still don’t understand and I don’t know if I ever will.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding herself closer to him, warmth spreading through her chest when his palms settled on her back. “And you were clearly going through something. You’re hurting, Loki. I’m not mad.”

He relaxed into her as if everything she’d said had stripped him of the weight of Yggdrasil. “I love you.”

The words were on the tip of her tongue weighted with every ounce of sincerity in her person. But as she looked up to tell him, she found herself speechless. Everything that Loki had kept from her, everything that had kept them apart had been spoken. It occurred to her in the soft pressure of his hands on her back and the warmth of his body against hers, the relief that radiated from him and the look in his eyes that there was something more.

She pressed her lips together, toying with the hairs on the back of his neck. “You did it for me.”

“Yes.” He admitted in lowly and Darcy realized how quiet their conversation had become.

Lifting her chin, Darcy’s gaze flicked unintentionally to his lips, then back to his eyes. “Don’t do it for me, dumbass. I love you too. And losing you would be a loss I’m not willing to face. You promised me that you wouldn’t die without at least telling me first.”

He chuckled a little, his breath warm on her lips. “The promise still stands.”

“Good.” Darcy said shortly, smiling with him. He was so pretty, the little shit that he was. A day in his company hadn’t done anything to sway her opinion. Loki was inhumanly beautiful. In the lowlights of her bedroom, the sharp lines of his cheekbones casting shadows over the hollows of his cheeks. His smile had drifted away, leaving traces of color in his face. Darcy could have sworn she’d never seen a nicer set of lips. Small, but pretty in shape, parted only slightly.

A long fingered hand touched under her chin, drawing her attention away from Loki’s lips with a tad of embarrassment. How long had she been staring? Hell, she didn’t know. It could’ve been years.

She was about to apologize for gawking when the very same lips she’d been admiring met her own in a soft, searing kiss.

Darcy would be lying like a rug if she said she hadn’t thought about kissing Loki. ‘Thought of’ was an understatement. She’d played out the entire scenario in her head, unintentionally, at least thirty-thousand times that day. Despite avoiding the temptation of his stupid mouth to save herself the pain of his leaving and endangering himself night after night, Darcy had other reasons for not kissing him sooner. Loki had kind of gone about the whole ‘push Darcy away after telling her you love her’ type thing. So, she figured he wasn’t very interested in playing a rousing game of tonsil hockey.

Thank God she was wrong. A girl can only take so much.

Loki’s kiss felt so…right. Not only in the sense that he was a damn fine kisser (because he was.) But the feel of his heartbeat under her palms as she moved them over his chest, the way his long fingers cradled the back of her head, the lean lines of his body pressed against her softer curves, the near reverent nibble of her bottom lip, the way her heart swelled and seemed to welcome him wholly into herself…
There was nothing about it, nothing about them, which seemed wrong. She wasn’t a mortal, he wasn’t a prince, there was no prophecy and Vanheim wasn’t at war with itself. Kissing Loki made everything simple and beautiful and entirely worth the last few months of being complete idiots.

When they finally parted, breathing heavily and cheeks blushed pink, Darcy wondered if this is what people meant about the purity of first love. It was eternal. Loki was her first love, there was no denying it. They began as children, open hearted and in need of a friend. And from there, they had grown into loving one another. Kissing him, loving him, being with him…it was natural. She felt so free and open to the point of emotional vulnerability.

But there was no question of whether or not to trust Loki. She’d trusted him with her life before she even understood the gravity of life’s meaning. She trusted him with her heart, fully and completely.

“Wow.” Darcy breathed, licking her lips. “That was…”

Loki grinned, brushing his thumb along her cheek. “Quite.”

They shared a tender look, tracing the others lips with their eyes, relishing in their togetherness for a moment more. Finally, Loki stood, offering her his hand. She took it without question, allowing him to pull her into bed.

“Tomorrow will be trying.” He reminded her as she pulled up the covers around them. “Rest, my love.”

Darcy sighed in attempt to relieve the rising lump in her throat. They faced each other, heads resting on their respective pillows, hands joined between them. Again, the feeling of concern boiled just under her skin. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something awful was going to happen.

With a short nod, she stretched across the few centimeters of space that separated them, placing a small kiss to his lips. He returned it, holding her closer and Darcy indulged in him as if it were the last time she would ever have the chance.

“Be safe tomorrow.” Darcy pleaded, her lips brushing the corner of his mouth. “You have a promise to keep.”

“I will be safe.” He vowed quietly, running his fingers through her hair. “I pinky promise.”

Soothed by the action and his oath, Darcy rest her head against his firm, wiry shoulder, drifting into the most peaceful sleep she’d had in months.

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Sif stretched languidly, tiredly grappling at the sheets beside her for Sigyn.

When her fingers found only warm sheets, she opened her eyes to find that Sigyn’s chambers were glowing orange and yellow, reflecting the Asgardian sunrise. Windows paneled almost the entire wall of Sigyn’s bed chamber, through which the gardens could be seen. Most of the time, pale blue drapes blocked the suns’ rays from entering the room. But this morning, Sigyn had opened them, allowing the remaining glimmers of light kiss her white-blonde hair and pale skin.

Sitting up, Sif appraised her lady.

Sif always thought Sigyn was a little skinny. Most noble women did have a fairly athletic form, Sigyn was no different. But she did have a narrow look about her. In her dresses she was slight and
willowy, but bare she was wiry and completely unafraid to use every last ounce of her strength to make love.

But since she’d started her apprenticeship, Sif had noticed her getting even slimmer. She assumed that the combination of the physical exertion of being a blacksmith’s apprentice along with her impending marriage to Thor was to blame. Sif would ask a favor of someone to make sure she ate more.

Turning her face to the side, Sif inhaled Sigyn’s scent off the pillow, committing it to memory. She had no idea how long she was to be away.

Thor claimed that the battle would be short. No doubt Asgard’s warriors would conquer all in her path. Sif agreed, however she was not so thick as to believe that the fight would be the end of their troubles.

Darcy claimed that Vanaheim’s relations with Asgard were fine, but their alliance with Alfheim could cause a disturbance with the elves. And if Asgardians had learned anything from their years on the battlefield, it was that none wished to fight the elves.

As nervous as Sif was for her first true battle, she was ready. She’d trained her life for this day.

Today was the day where she would walk into battle with her sword and shield and prove to the men of Asgard, prove to the First Einherjar and to the Allfather that she was a warrior. This was her chance to be a true warrior. She could see Tyr again.

With a hopeful smile, she watched Sigyn open the window, allowing a gentle breath of wind to brush her hair and ripple the fabric of her shift.

If she was a warrior, she and Sigyn could be together.

Even if she were to have the acceptance of her parents repealed, Sif would be at ease. She was fully grown now, as was Tyr…in a sense. She had no reason to steer clear of her brother. If need be, she would find a way around the law if it meant that she could have both her brother and her love.

When she was a warrior, she would want nothing but that which she’d been denied her entire childhood.

Acceptance.

She fought hard for it, and she wasn’t going to give it up just because she loved Sigyn and her mother and father won’t cope.

At last, Sif pulled herself from under the sheets, making her way over to Sigyn.

The blonde haired lady turned, holding out her hand with a sad smile. “Good morn, Love.”

“Mm.” Sif agreed, kissing her lightly as Sigyn slid her arms around her from behind. Despite Sif carrying a great deal more muscle than Sigyn, they were of equal height. Darcy always thought it was funny that, while Sif was of larger presence in a room or group, Sigyn likened to the larger presence in their relationship. It was Sigyn that held her, and Sigyn waltzed her in the privacy of her chambers. It was how they fit together and Sif wouldn’t want it any other way.

“I should leave soon.” Sif said quietly, tilting her head to the side, giving Sigyn space to kiss her neck. “You handmaidens will come by in no time.”
Sigyn grumbled something very unladylike indeed and squeezed her middle tighter. “I will not see you for gods know how long. I want to remember you.”

Sif’s breath caught as Sigyn’s hand slid under the hem of her tunic. “Quite. Ten minutes at the most.”

Thirty minutes later, Sif was scrambling to put her clothes on as the maids rapped impatiently at the door.

Sif leaned casually on the wall a respectable distance from Sigyn’s bed, as if to imply that she’d stopped in early that morning to greet her friend before the day arose. Quickly, she tied her hair back and adjusted her tunic while Sigyn tied a robe around her body, hurriedly throwing herself onto the chaise. She would have appeared bored, or perhaps even regal if her hair had not been in such a state of disarray.

“Enter.” She called at last.

The handmaidens came in a flurry, each of them shooting Sif dirty looks. It wasn’t the first time she’d been caught in Sigyn’s chambers. Thankfully, Darcy had made sure it was not uncommon for the three ladies to spend the night in one another’s rooms. The entire palace knew that Sif and Sigyn were friends; hopefully, Sif’s presence in her room would merely be taken as one friend visiting another.

“Lady Sif,” one asked with tense politeness. “We would kindly appreciate it if you were to leave. Today is a very big day for Lady Sigyn and we must focus on preparing her.”

Sif grimaced and Sigyn stood as if she were a goddess, demanding attention. That’s one of the things Sif loved about her. Sigyn was both the perfect lady and the worst lady. She looked the part, strikingly so. High cheekbones, blonde hair, blue eyes, flawless skin and a willowy figure… She was quiet and composed, a true beauty and a timid occupant in groups of three or more.

And yet, she was completely embittered, preferred women, secretly became a blacksmith’s apprentice and refused, in her own mind, to comply to anyone’s will but her own.

“Howd, Sif may stay.” She told her handmaiden with the authority of someone who’d never lived a day without some kind of power. “I must speak with her later on.”

In actuality, Sif should have been down with her comrades, preparing for battle. But she could hold off for a few moments.

The handmaidens helped Sigyn bathe, did her hair, picked her clothes and shoes, and blushed her perfect face creams and powders. Little drops from a pink vial were rubbed into her feet and perfumes were spritzed into her hair and dress.

Sif waited until they were finished, watching the process take place. The careful fitting of her dresses, the meticulous attention to her teeth and jewelry…it was all too familiar to Sif. Even if her parents were to accept her again, she had no desire to return to the life of a lady.

Finally, when the handmaidens were finished, they cleaned up their mess and left, leaving Sigyn to look as though she’d woken up in a silver gown and braided hair.

Sigyn waited for the door to close before kissing her lady soundly.

“I’m going to miss you.” Sif told her quietly, dreading the moment when they would have to part.
Sigyn tucked a lock of hair behind her ear affectionately, “Would you like something to remember me by?”

Smirking, Sif pulled her closer by her hips. “Perhaps.”

They indulged in a lingering kiss before Sigyn pulled away, a serious look in her bright blue eyes. “Sif, there is something I must show you.”

“By all means.” Sif encouraged, waiting in curiosity as Sigyn pulled from the neck of her dress, a key with her name engraved on the side.

Sif was familiar with the thing. Sigyn never took it off. When she and Loki were courting, she had given it to him as her token.

For a moment, Sif expected Sigyn to offer it to her. But she didn’t.

Instead, the lady approached her bedside, getting to her knees to pull from underneath an intricate silver box, decorated with stenciled griffins and dragons. Purposefully, she poked the key into the lock and turned. From inside the red velvet lined chest, she procured an amulet.

It was a fine piece of jewelry, embedded with sapphires, the jewels the people of Jolena prided themselves on. It was gorgeous, inscribed with oaths in the ancient language and hanging on a sturdy silver chain.

Sigyn held it pensively, turning to Sif with a melancholy smile. “This was a gift from my mother and father. It was the only thing they ever truly gave me.”

Holding the periapt in the palm of her hand, Sigyn approached her thoughtfully. “It is the sign of my province, it is the signature accessory of my family and that which I have kept close all these years.”

Sif blinked at the twinkling glow of the gems within. “It is beautiful.”

“Indeed.” Sigyn agreed. “I would be honored, Lady Sif, if you would accept it as my token.”

Caught in a whirl of emotions, Sif bowed her head. “My lady, I couldn’t—“

“You can.” Sigyn urged, taking her hands and placing the amulet in them. “Please, Sif. I must present a token to Thor before he departs. I will give him my key, for the treasure it keeps locked away shall be with you,” Sigyn pleaded, stroking the length of her cheek. “You are my heart, Sif.”

“And you are mine.” Sif replied, her throat thick. She grasped the amulet, holding it over her heart. “I will carry it with honor.”

They embraced once more, savoring the precious seconds they had together before the troops left.

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Thor stood on the bifrost, excitement charging through his every nerve.

This was the day he’d been waiting for. It was an opportunity to prove himself a man and a prince worthy of being king. He would be the warrior to lead his men (and women) to victory.

Mjolnir gripped tight in his hand, Thor looked to his brother.

Loki appeared as he usually did, which shocked Thor. He wore his armor, which consisted only of
dark leathers and a few armored plates concealed within. His helm was nowhere to be seen and neither was his cape. He held no weapons. If they had not been standing at the mouth of the bifrost, waiting for their troops to assemble and the Allfather to make his speech, Thor would have believed that it was any other day for Loki.

“Brother, you are not dressed for battle.” Thor pointed out to him.

To this, Loki sighed tiredly, “Am I?”

“Come now,” Thor insisted, “You have not your helm, nor any proper armor.”

Loki gave him a sideways glance. “I will be fine.”

“You will be impaled.” Thor tried again, but Loki ignored him. He was far too apt at that. Giving in, he changed the topic, unable to contain his enthusiasm. “This is the day we prove ourselves to Asgard. I will prove myself a worthy ruler.”

Loki nodded, though said nothing. In the bout of silence, a slight concern occurred to him.

“Loki, does High Lord Bjarte still desire Vanir land for Nornheim?” Thor asked, reflecting upon their last battle. As a young adolescent, what he once thought as a great war had actually been a small rebellion on the Norn’s part. But the purpose of that rebellion had been Bjarte and Nornheim’s want for a war with the Vanir.

He supposed, they were getting what they wanted.

At Thor’s question, Loki’s brow furrowed. “Yes.”

Confused, Thor asked on. “But how? Asgard is not meaning to conquer land, only to settle the feud and remind the Vanir that the Aesir are the protectors of the Nine.”

“It is an inane prospect,” Loki said, his attention gazing onto the stars. “for the province of one realm to individually claim territory over land on another realm. It would no doubt cause another great war.”

“So, that’s what Bjarte wants!” Thor exclaimed victoriously, “Another war? To bring Nornheim honor?”

“That is what he has lead the court to believe.” Loki replied sourly.

Thor cocked a brow, “You think him to be dishonest?”

“I know him to be.” Loki replied offhandedly, “As for his intentions on Vanheim, I am unsure. Darcy has her own theories. Your interest on the matter is belated.”

Thor snickered at the mention of Darcy. Neither Loki nor his advisor had come out for drinks with Fandrall, Hogun, Sif, Volstagg and himself last night and Loki had not been in his chambers.

It was commonplace knowledge for anyone in the palace that Loki and Darcy had not been on the best of terms. Thor knew from speaking with Sif and Sigyn, but mostly Fandrall. Sif and her lady were Darcy’s friends and preferred not to divulge all of her private life to him. Fandrall, on the other hand, flirted with the ladies and the maids and appreciated their gossip far more than he should. When Fandrall was around, Thor was sure to receive an update on the latest happenings in the palace.
Thor wasn’t sure how committed he was to that idea. Loki always appeared as though everything was fine, but Darcy was seemed upset.

He shrugged off thoughts of Loki and Darcy as the Allfather, clad in his ceremonial armor and bearing Gungnir, sat atop Sleipnir at the entrance to the bifrost. His brother’s dramatics could be saved for another time, for now, he must focus on the future heat of the fight.

For when the war has past, and he has guided his warriors well, he will be renowned as a greater leader than even Odin Allfather. He will be honored for what he has done for the realm. There would be feasts, drinking, women, a break from the tireless meetings having lead up to this occasion…

The Allfather raised Gungnir to the sky and suddenly the crowd of Einherjar conjoined on the Bifrost Bridge. In that moment, Thor felt as though his legacy was laid before him. He was Odin, his mere presence demanding the respect of thousands. His many years in battle built onto the glory of Asgard. He would be King. But he would be greater than even Odin. He would surpass his father, while still paying respect where respect was due.

Mjolnir would be the symbol of triumph and he, the one to lift it, would raise a mighty world.

The Allfather gave his army a grim smile, “Asgard has long sworn to protect the Nine Realms from ruin and chaos. We have done our best to defend the lesser, strengthen our own, and maintain peace throughout Yggdrasil.”

Thunderous applause cracked through the air and Thor raised his hammer with the rest in wholehearted agreement with his father.

As the masses settled, Odin continued his speech. “Vanaheim, sister-realm and ally to Asgard, have fallen to ruin and destruction. It is our duty and honor to restore peace and civility amongst the Vanir. We fight with the noble tribal peoples of their realm. Fight with them, die with them, for those who are your comrades in battle, are your brother. Your bond is deeper than blood.”

At this, Thor turned to Loki as Loki turned to him.

He would defend his brother, just as he always swore he would. No matter how tumultuous their relationship was, Thor had engrained in himself when they were but small children that he was to protect Loki.

And now that they were older, Loki could take a hit and deal a fair bit of pain. Thor trusted him to have his back.

“May your battle be swift! May your sword be sharp and aim true! Any warriors lost to us today, will forever reign in the golden halls of Valhalla!”

Cheers erupted across the Bifrost Bridge as Odin inclined his head to his sons. “Lead well, fight with wisdom as well as strength.”

Thor raised Mjolnir, “We will bring glory once again to Asgard, Father!”

The corners of his lips turned up in a short grin and he gave a nod of approval before storming away on Sleipnir. Thor did not watch him go, instead focusing on Heimdall opening the Bifrost to the pathway to Vanaheim.

***
Lord Bjarte waited patiently atop a steep slope, overlooking the Asgardian warriors meeting with the tribal warriors they were to be fighting with.

He smirked at how the Asgardians welcomed them into their numbers, faces painted with lust and enthusiasm for blood. They were all so very trusting. None seemed suspicious of the tribes; no face seemed skeptical or concerned. The warriors were loud, boisterous, and ready to bleed for glory.

That is what he was counting on.

Although, there were exceptions, in this case as well as any other.

Amongst the crowd stood the second prince, his hands free of a weapon, his face sullen. He stood behind his brother, the brash Crown Prince, as the others talked strategy.

It made Bjarte smug.

Prince Loki was already an outcast amongst his family. His ideals were different, his appearance was darker, his mind and tongue sharper, his magic was more powerful…And yet he was not the same as them. He didn’t belong. Soon, all of Asgard would know why.

Loki suddenly stood straighter at something being said and responded. Thor stepped further in front of him, continuing to blather on. The second prince sighed, looking past the group to someone farther away.

Bjarte followed his gaze to the single flaw in his plan.

Advisor Darcy.

This lovely morning on Vanaheim, Asgard’s favorite Advisor was clad in armor that looked suspiciously like Prince Loki’s, only the accents were purple and silver rather than green and gold.

She appeared unnerved. Though she talked and smiled, laughed and welcomed the Vanaheim tribal fighters she would be marching into battle with, she seemed anxious. Though Lord Bjarte could see, she was less perturbed by the people around her, than she was with the situation itself.

Clever girl.

Bjarte was not concerned that Advisor Darcy would put an end to his ploy. She couldn’t possibly; she didn’t have the power to. But she was far from incapable of doing damage. Not to mention her relationship with Prince Loki was both useful and annoying. Useful, in the sense that she would do anything to protect him. Annoying because ‘anything’ could range from any variety of things that were sure to disrupt his plans at some point or another.

But it would hardly matter before too long. There was nothing she could do to stop the turn of events. He made sure that General Hervingr had stripped her of every ounce of power she could possibly have on the battlefield. She was to be placed as far away from her precious prince as he could get her.

The little lady pivoted on her heel, searching the field with squinted eyes, hands resting on the grips of her swords.

She stood out in the crowd. Not just because of her diminutive height, but her very presence. Even in the palace halls and the city streets, the balls and the meetings, the days and the nights…Advisor Darcy seemed just as out of place as her prince. He was not quite as magically astute as Asgard’s queen, but he was not quite so dumb. It was apparent Advisor Darcy was not Asgardian.
She was weak and had no right to be in her current position.

At last, General Hervingr and Prince Thor, along with the tribal leaders came to a conclusion. Prince Loki nodded, making a final, terse statement before the group dispersed.

Bjarte gazed down at Hervingr and the tribal leaders for a nod of assurance. They each gave it to him in turn, solemn expressions masking their faces. He smiled to himself as the warriors began to part, Thor shouting commands at them.

The air had become thick with bloodlust. The time had come.

He descended from the top of his slope, brushing past General Hervingr, speaking lightly to the leading members of the tribes’ collective council. “Perform the ceremony, ready your men.”

All of them made cautious eye contact, clearly worried for his intentions. He was unaware of most tribal Vanheim traditional clothing and armor. He only ever became versed in their magical practices for his own advantages. But the leaders were dressed quite plainly than he believed they would be. Earthy toned armor with dull steel accents and an assortment of blades and blunt weapons strapped to different parts of their bodies; they were dressed for war.

One of them, Bjarte was unfamiliar with his name, stepped forwards. “Asgardian,” he addressed him in a heavily accented voice, “You have voice in us, and we in our men. They are good people. They do not deserve the pain you ask of them.”

Was this a plea? From the weak? Did this savage man truly not realize the extent of his conquests? “You and your men will bring about Asgard’s revolution. You should be honored.”

Another from the group of four stepped forth in anger. “You have given us no choice but to participate in your games! In your trickery! Farce of man!”

Bjarte smirked smugly at his outburst. It was quite illuminating to be the one in charge. They had no choice but to do as he said, just as it would be from here on out.

When he said nothing in his humor, the first, the tamer, leader of the bunch, hushed his comrade. “Asgardian, we ask only that you pay our men the respect they have fought for. You forced us into this rebellion for reasons even we do not know. But our warriors are of sound mind. Treat them as your own men.”

Bjarte kept an impassive demeanor, willing away his irritation. “I exercise equity on all accounts. My men are as of equal value to me as yours, for they serve the very same purpose.”

The chieftain raised his chin, lips tightening over his teeth. He would lash out if only he could. But his magical prowess was lesser and petty. He had no power that could compare to that which Bjarte held over him. “What is the purpose?”

Bjarte quirked a smug grin, watching Prince Loki cross the field, standing before the warriors as the prince he wished he was. “A distraction.”

***

“Sorry.” Darcy apologized to the Vanir man, Jerdin, for bumping into him for the thirty-second time in the past forty minutes. He was pretty hot, if not completely fed up with her bumbling existence behind him.

Darcy figured war would be a bit more interesting. She didn’t know what exactly to expect when
they first arrived. Maybe someone would make a grand speech, maybe hoards of Vanir would storm them from above and they would start fighting.

None of that happened.

Instead, she was marching through a forest, poking her sword at big leaves and doing her best to keep up with Sif. The worst part about her boredom was that she had plenty of time to dwell on what could possibly happen. She was stuck waiting, wondering what was happening with Loki. They had been separated almost immediately and she couldn’t help but think something terrible had happened.

The plan was, as figured by Thor, General Hervingr and, in part, Loki, based on the surrounding area, was to create a perimeter through the tribal territories surrounding several of the noble forts.

The tribes had been doing slowly damaging the Capital Vanir had been building up their defenses before announcing war in hopes to give them a head start against the tribes. Unfortunately for them, what the nobles had in resources and numbers, the tribes made up in skill. Guerilla warfare was a very important component to take into account, especially concerning these sets of battles.

Even without Asgard’s extra men, Darcy had no doubt that the tribes could have wiped out the noble forces just because of their fighting style and ability to maneuver the dense forest area that encompassed the majority of Vanaheim.

There were a total of three forts. The two on the outside were smaller according to the tribal scouts, each holding no more than fifty warriors. The center, however, was significantly larger with at least two hundred warriors. Surrounding the forts were the rest of the forces. The scouts were extremely unsure of how many exactly, but the capital was not short on fighters. They shared many Asgardian ideals as far as war was concerned.

There were more forts scattered throughout Vanaheim, but, for now, they were targeting these three.

It wasn’t a terrible strategy, though Darcy hadn’t gotten all of the information. Sif and her Asgardian military companions were given the order to lead their quadrant, including the twenty or so tribal people, to take the farthest perimeter and eliminate the smallest base.

Sif was nonplussed and Darcy could imagine. The woman worked damn hard to prove herself and there wasn’t a lot of opportunity to do that if she was far away from the heat of the battle.

Darcy was equally unimpressed with their direction. Loki, being a prince, was going to be attacking the largest base.

Annoyed, she poked a leafy plant with the tip of her sword, causing Jerdin to roll his eyes. They had talked for a little bit, but she could tell he didn’t really like her too much. But, being that she was bored and trying to not break down into a nervous wreck, she tried talking to him again.

“So, is the weather usually this nice?” she asked him waving her hand about. The air was warm and slightly humid, but it wasn’t too bad. She didn’t think it’d be the best idea to insult this guy’s realm. He was super big…and his exposed, gleaming biceps were as large as her head.

“No.” he answered shortly.

Darcy sheathed her sword with a sigh. “Yeah, I figured. The humidity probably isn’t the best for fighting. I bet it gets pretty sweaty out here, huh?”
“No.”

“No even a little bit?”

“No.”

“Huh.” Darcy said, scratching the back of her neck. Loki had put her hair back into a bun, but no helm. She’d insisted against it. She didn’t know how well her personal style with a sword would work with a helm. She could hardly fight properly in armor. “You know, I’m probably going to sweat.”

Jerdin turned to her, holding up the group as he glared intently down at her. A few of their comrades protested at the stop, shouting rude things at them. Jerdin didn’t pay any mind, instead choosing to persist in his angry glaring.

“Hi?” Darcy tried uncertainly, not mistaking the look in his eyes for anything less than infuriation. Maybe the whole nervous talking thing should stop.

“You.” Jerdin started bluntly, “The dark prince calls you his advisor.”

Darcy wondered when the fuck Loki had gotten around to telling everyone that. Or maybe he knew her for other reasons. Not that she was particularly involved in foreign affairs, but…she got around. “That’s me. Why?”

“I cannot cut your tongue out. To hurt the prince’s things is to have him take my life. But you are tempting me.” Jerdin threatened and Darcy swallowed hard, finding her smart-words. She was Darcy Fucking Lewis and she was not scared of a heavily muscled man who wanted to rip her tongue out.

“You know, Jerdin,” she began slowly, “That sounds an awful lot like a personal problem. But, if you said ‘please’, I might be willing to shut up.”

Jerdin looked like he was about ready to whap her with his heavy looking mace when a strong hand closed around her upper arm.

“That won’t be necessary. Let’s continue on, men.” Sif said, tugging her friend away to the front of the line. “Darcy, why?”

“Sorry.” Darcy apologized, smirking to herself. “I was just trying to make conversation.”

“We are at war, Darcy.”

“Yeah, and I’m bored.”

Sif made a face, not letting go of Darcy’s arm, keeping them moving at a relatively quick pace near the front of the group. After that, there wasn’t much conversation, leaving Darcy to walk with her own thoughts.

She considered the plants she passed, remembering a few of them from Frigga’s lessons. Briefly, she recalled what she knew of Vanir tribes during battle. The chiefs would often perform a ceremony, during which a spell would be cast upon the warriors. During battle, the magic between them would enact and they’d be faced with one singular purpose given to them by the tribal leaders.

As far as she knew, the ceremony had been performed for this battle. She was sort of interested to
Sif called the attention of one of her comrades, making a note that they were almost to the river and they would need to turn soon to get to the fort. They agreed and it wasn’t another five minutes before they came across the previously mentioned river.

It wasn’t very big. The crossing was shallow enough to walk through with thick roots snaking just under the surface of the rippling current. Sif pulled ahead of the crowd and Darcy followed, squinting to try and see the other side.

“Excellent. We’re ahead of schedule.” She noted, looking through an opening in the canopy to see the sun which was still high in the sky. “We should be to the fort soon. We’ll rest there before laying siege.”

Darcy nodded in agreement, curious as to how this was going to play out. She wasn’t keen on killing anyone, so it was likely she’d just be stabbing a few unlucky bastards in the thighs. She trusted herself to keep out of harm’s way. She wasn’t exactly a novice with a sword.

Sif had one foot in the water and Darcy was on her way to follow when the wet, slick sound of metal piercing skin and blunt weapons hitting skulls met their ears.

Darcy turned on her heel immediately, gasping sharply at the sight of at least ten of Asgard’s finest dead, dying and bleeding in the hands of the tribal warriors. Amongst said dead, dying and bleeding was the official leader of their group, otherwise known as the dude qualified to tell a bunch of rowdy Asgardians how to stab stuff strategically.

It took Darcy a second to process what exactly was happening, and in that second, Sif had her sword out, along with the remaining five Asgardians, all of them prepared to fight.

Sif’s comrades, each of them she recognized from the training field, froze in place, unsure of what to do. The blood of their friends and companions wet the dirt and ferns they’d been dropped upon. Sif, on the other hand, was stone cold and poised to kill. “What is the meaning of this?!?”

Jerdin released the man he had by the neck, simultaneously yanking his mace out of another’s skull. Instead of answering Sif, he stepped forwards in perfect harmony with his fellow warriors, focusing on the Asgardians with murder in their eyes.

The Asgardian men raised their weapons to fight, only Sif and Darcy holding their place.

Darcy’s mind raced as her brain struggled to catch up with the turn of events. She was getting far too comfortable with sudden death for her taste. But her mind had moved past the poor souls lying dead in the mud. There was something different about the warriors. The look in their eyes…the aura around them was…magical.

“It’s a trap.” Darcy muttered to herself. “The ceremony. Sif, they’re magically enhanced. We’re fucked. In the ass. With a large splintery pole.”

Sif made a disgusted face, “Must you describe it that way?”

“Pay attention!” Darcy demanded in a whisper of her friend, grabbing her arm and slowly pulling her back as the Vanir warriors advanced in even, lethal paces. “We’ve been set up. These guys have been magically influenced by their chieftains.”

“What?” Sif asked, sounding more annoyed and frustrated than anything.
“It’s a common tribal rite of battle. The chiefs perform a ceremony before battle. Once battle starts, they enact the spell and the warriors are joined by the common goal of the chief. They are beyond reason.” Darcy explained, recalling her lessons with Frigga what seemed like forever ago.

Sif pursed her lips in thought, continuing to back into the current. “Why are the chiefs trying to kill us? What is this treachery?”

“I don’t know.” Darcy whispered back, suddenly very concerned for Loki. “I don’t know if it’s just us either. But we won’t get a chance to find out if we don’t act. P-R-O-N-T-O, pronto.”

“Right.” Sif agreed, swinging her sword in the air, “Men, in position! Fell, Ergil, round them!”

It was shocking how easily the men followed Sif’s command. It was as if they’d been waiting for it. Fell and Ergil divided, leading four men behind the group of Vanir so the Asgardians encircled their enemy. Darcy joined the circle, defensively positioning her swords in front of her as one of the Vanir warriors lashed out at her. Her knees buckled at the force of his hit as she waited for Sif’s next direction.

“Hold!” Sif commanded and Darcy swore as she struggled to hold her ground. Maybe Loki was right. Maybe it wasn’t the best idea for her, as a mortal, to head into battle.

The Asgardians, plus Darcy, held the circle, pushing at the Vanir, keeping them tight together. Their opponents had enough space to struggle, but not enough to stab or attack with their weapons. They could only throw their weight forwards in attempt to tumble over the Einherjar.

“Sif!” Darcy protested as her feet began to slip in the mud. Her arms were burning with effort and the dude pushing on her swords really needed a tic tac. The magic coming off him wasn’t strong per say, but he probably didn’t have a very high tolerance.

“Release!” Sif called out and immediately the group of Asgardians retreated. Their sudden withdrawal left the Vanir to fall forwards, many of them falling face-first to the ground.

And, just as it had sounded before, metal met flesh as the Asgardians did away with their attackers. Darcy was saved from having to drive her sword into the skull of Jerdin by Sif, who took the kill with slick skill and smooth precision. At least Jerdin wouldn’t feel any pain.

Everything was silent as the once clear water of the river turned pink with the blood of the recently deceased. Taking a deep breath and sheathing her swords, Darcy brought her mind from the static rift it had thrown itself into, turning to Sif. “We need to go find the center base.”

Sif’s jaw set. “Who do you think did this? The Capital? Perhaps they sought to damage Asgard’s forces?”

“No fucking clue.” Darcy responded, cringing at the half truth. She had her suspicions, all of them leading back to a certain High Lord, “But I know that the same thing that happened these guys, happened to the rest of the Vanir tribal members.”

Flicking the blood from her blade, Sif considered their options. “We should continue on, complete the duty we were given.”

Darcy stared at her incredulously. “Sif, you can’t be serious.”

“I am.” Sif said sternly. “We were given a task, we should see it through.”

Darcy shook her head. “There is now way just the few of us can take that fort. Loki and Thor are
probably already to the main fortress. They need our help.”

Sif crossed her arms in defiance, prepared to argue, when, suddenly, things went dark.

It was as if the sun had been blocked at all angles, leaving the two girls and the now panicked Asgardian troops in a dome of darkness. Fear fluttered in Darcy’s chest as she drew her swords again, her back against Sif’s.

No one spoke for a very long time, waiting in fearful silence for something to happen.

At last, Darcy couldn’t take it anymore. “Who turned out the lights?”

Sif elbowed her hard in the side just as a beam of light opened up before them, sunlight streaming down through an opening in the canopy. It seemed to bright compared to the darkness they’d been plunged into that Darcy could see nothing else.

From the depths of the forest, a woman walked into the makeshift spotlight.

Darcy was no stranger to women. As a matter of fact, she, herself, was one. This woman, however, was a mystery to her. She was taller than Sif, with black braided hair and rich colored skin. Blue and red lines traced hard patterns across her body from head to toe. A dangerous looking blade was strapped to her thigh and sturdy belt was tied around her waist. A strip of leather wound tightly around her torso from her neck to the space just above her navel.

Immediately, Darcy recognized her clan.

“The Meiri.” Darcy breathed, again remembering her lessons. The Meiri were an all women’s tribe known as the most fearsome group to walk Vanaheim’s free land. They kept most of their dealings secret and did their best to keep out of realm politics. “We’re super duper fucked now.”

Sif stiffened, leaning over to whisper in Darcy’s ear as she appraised the woman. “Is that really so terrible?”

Darcy snorted, trying her best to mask it with a cough. “Gods, Sif. Really?”

Before Sif had the opportunity to answer, the Meiri woman spoke, her voice deep and throaty. “Who is your leader?”

Darcy swallowed hard, pointing nervously to the ground. “He’s one of those dead guys dressed in gold.”

The woman stepped forwards, the light following her as she approached Darcy with narrowed eyes. “I do not speak to the dead. And so I ask again, who leads you?”

Their small clearing brightened only slightly so Darcy could see the Asgardian warriors. Each of them turned ever so slowly to Sif. Darcy followed their movements, compelled to direct the woman to she who lead them through the battle that could have been her death sentence.

The woman smiled almost cruelly. Her every feature seemed to radiate all the fierceness the name of her tribe implied. Darcy was in awe, anxiously awaiting their next move. “A man would not have survived such an attack. You and your men,” she said the word with some level of dismissal, “are living proof of this.”

Sif gasped and Darcy held up her hands, heart thundering in her chest. “Woah woah woah, back up a sec. Please tell me you don’t mean what I think you mean.”
The Meiri woman lifted her chin, cocking her head to the side, listening for something in the distance. “One division besides yours remains. The largest one, which attacks the noble’s grand fortress.”

Darcy breathed a noticeable sigh of relief. “Great. How long will it take me to get there?”

The Meiri woman stared down at her with a spark of curiosity, then with humor. “It will take you, and your tortoise legs, several hours. Even longer now that the rest of the tribes have finished with Asgard’s other men and are now targeting you.”

Darcy swore and Sif bent her head in concentration. “I thank you for telling us this. It has been most helpful.”

The woman inclined her head in return. “I have not helped you yet, though I intend to.”

The two ladies paused, waiting for the offer. Without the Meiri’s help, they were as good as dead.

“Meiri have passages through the forest. The trees provide cover and magic aids our path. We could carry you to the greater of your forces.”

Sif nodded slowly, opening her mouth to agree, but Darcy spoke first. “What would you like in return?”

The Meiri woman smirked, the corners of her lips tearing her face into something impish. “You are clever, girl. Your mouth is a sufficient hiding place for your wit.”

Darcy was getting kind of sick of these backhanded compliments. “My tortoise legs and I agree with that. Cough it up, lady. I don’t care how pretty you are, you just said big men with blunt weapons are coming to kill us. What do you want?”

Sif sighed in exasperation and the Meiri woman seemed all the more humored at Darcy, before her expression turned vicious. “The Meiri are not friends of other tribes. We prefer our own company. But their presence keeps harmony and balance in the free land. Someone of your realm has perturbed this peace.”


“We do not know.” The woman proclaimed duly. “If we assist you, Asgardians, you will find this man and give him to the Meiri.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “Why give him to you?”

“Justice.” The woman explained sharply, her words sending a chill down Darcy’s spine.

Any traitor on the battlefield would rightfully face Asgardian justice. Giving them to the Meiri would be an action she was surely not qualified to do. Even if she did find the perpetrator, they would deserve a fair trial. It was their right.

Something told Darcy the Meiri didn’t have a nice, peaceful trial in mind for the guy that ruined their realm’s peace.

“I’m not permitted to make this trade. If he is found out by the authorities, he’ll face Asgardian justice.” Darcy responded sullenly, thinking about how painful death truly was.
The Meiri woman’s upper lips turned in and she bent over to whisper menacingly in Darcy’s face. “I did not say that your ‘authorities’ would find him. I said you. You are capable. You know the truth. The Meiri will help you, if you bring us this man.”

Darcy grounded herself, angling her chin upwards to equate herself in height to the Meiri woman. “My life is not worth the sacrifice of Asgard’s judicial ideals.”

It was a bluff. As strongly as Darcy believed in justice, she really didn’t want to die without knowing whether or not Loki was going to be okay. Also, she kind of left Frank and Fenrir with Frigga and they would be really confused and hurt if she never came home.

“I will compromise.” Darcy added calmly, her skills as an advisor moving into the negotiation of the Meiri’s help. “If you help us, I’ll find the traitor…personally. After I find him, I’ll give the Meiri some time with him. You can do whatever you want to the bastard so long as you don’t kill him and he can still talk to state his case in Asgardian court.”

“That is not our way.” The woman countered sternly. “We want him dead.”

“Well,” Darcy said with a small smile, “Have you ever heard the saying, ‘you can’t always get what you want’? Because I think you’re going to have to settle. I can’t do much better than that.”

Darcy for sure thought she was going to die. The Meiri woman was furious, quaking with ferocity. Her body was the earth, shaking and vibrating, threatening to tear up every tree from its roots. Darcy willed her bladder to stay strong. Wetting her pants in armor she needed help to take off was hardly the best option.

Just when her life started flashing before her eyes, the Meiri woman relented. “Very well. We will accept this. Best move quickly, your armor will make travel slower.”

There was a great rustle about them as the area around them brightened again and a multitude of women fell from the trees. Darcy’s jaw dropped when she realized it had been them blocking the light. “Holy fucking shit.”

Sif nodded in agreement as the Meiri woman bent down on one knee, holding her arm out to Sif. The motion was clear; she was telling Sif to get on her back. A second woman approached Darcy and bid her to do the same.

Darcy, her heart racing, thoughts strictly on her prince, accepted the Meiri’s offer, getting on the woman, piggy-back style.

Sif made to do the same, then stopped. “What about my men?”

The leader of the Meiri, the woman who spoke to them, let out a gravelly sound darcy identified as a laugh. “We do not help the men. They think themselves strong. They can fight the bull-headed tribes.”

Sif’s every muscle froze and she squared her shoulders. “Then I am afraid I must stay.”

The Meiri woman gazed at her incredulously, her eyes flicking back and forth between the two girls. “You would stay and die with the men?” she asked Sif, “And you would give your life for justice so few care about? I have lived in your world, Asgardians. No man is worth death.”

“No.” Sif concurred, “But honor is worth every breath I ever gave. I will die with my comrades and fight my way to Valhalla.”
Darcy, who was already comfortably situated on a really tall lady’s back, rolled her eyes. “Asgardians.” She said to the woman she was on, “They’re all crazy little shits. Gotta love ’em, though.”

The leader of the Meiri hesitated before drawing her sword. “Tara,” she said and the woman holding Darcy grunted in acknowledgement. “Take that one to her men. Stay with her, make sure she lives.”

Tara nodded once, “And you, Micata?”

The leader, Micata, raised her jagged sword to the sunlight, it’s dull greenish hue glinting ominously in the midday light. “The Meiri will fight with the Asgardians. It has been long since we showed them our power. Honor this one’s wishes and we will avenge the free land.”

Darcy’s surprise almost overcame her concern. Sif’s eyes were glossy with admiration as the hoards of women warriors took position over the river, slinking in deadly patterns across the forest floor.

“Fight well.” Darcy said quietly as Tara began running away, flinging herself and Darcy into the nearest tree. In a rush of green and black, they were off, using unfamiliar magic to accomplish feats she could hardly even imagine. And in the flurry of action, Darcy’s only thoughts were on a certain prince and the hope that her worst fears weren’t doomed to become a reality.

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Earlier that day…

Loki waited as patiently as possible for Thor to pay attention to the problem at hand.

It had been a long morning.

It started brilliantly with him waking up in Darcy’s bed, uncomfortably positioned between Fenrir and Jörmungandr with a mouthful of Darcy’s hair. It had been his most pleasant awakening in months. He and Darcy got ready together and he relished in slipping back into their routine. Even so, there was a feeling of finality to it that Loki detested. It felt unreal, as if it were the last morning they were to spend together.

He’d kicked the thought from his mind until they were back on Asgard. They agreed upon leaving Fenrir and Jörmungandr with his mother and Sigyn. The two got into enough trouble as it was, they were better off out of harm’s way.

After Odin had given his tedious speech on the Bifrost, they went to Vanaheim where Loki was to be reminded of his place as the lesser prince. While Thor and General Hervingr spewed their basic, rudimentary ideas to the tribal chiefs, Loki listened carefully, thinking of ways to keep the whole thing from falling into ruin.

The plan produced by his brother and Asgard’s highest ranking Einherjar was unsatisfactory, in his opinion, but it would work. There would be far more bloodshed than necessary, but the whole thing would be over quickly enough. With any luck, the nobles would surrender within the first few hours, he could find Darcy, and they could return to the capital to work out the new peace treaty between the free land tribes and the noble population.

Afterwards, he and Darcy could return to Asgard and he could indulge in her kisses without the threat of death and war hanging over his head. Really, what had he been thinking? He could have been with Darcy for months now, back in her bed, kissing her to sleep every night.
Because kissing Darcy felt natural. The more he did it, the more he realized how much of an effort it was not to kiss her.

Until he saw her again, he needed to focus on the task at hand: Infiltrating and destroying the Vanir’s central fort. Thor had taken to calling it Fort Stór. It was a four story construct, built mainly from pine wood, pieced together with metal supports. Men on every level safeguarded the territory they’d marked out in the free land.

It was quite the system from what Loki saw. The warriors scouting the perimeter were great in number, scattered frequently within the forest outside the clearing; each were heavily armed and tightly strung with anticipation. Fortunately, the Asgardians were given the advantage of the open field. It gave them some distance between the heavily armed fortress and the men in the forest.

On the other hand, getting across the clearing to take the fort would be challenging. A frontal attack would do them more harm than good seeing as how they were outnumbered.

But, the Asgardians had the aid of the tribal people who knew the free land best.

His and Thor’s men had taken position on higher ground, the warriors practically humming with eagerness for the fight to come. Thor paced the ground, looking down at the fort with scrutiny as he tried to devise a plan. Unfortunately for them, their leader, the crowned prince of Asgard, was far more skilled at hitting things with blunt objects than devising actual strategy.

At long last, Thor called attention to the men, a triumphant grin on his bearded face as he made to tell them his scheme to bring down the fort. Loki braced himself for the worst.

“My brothers in battle,” Thor began in a tone reminiscent of the Allfather’s speech to them earlier that day, “this is our time. We shall descend from these high grounds and encircle the fort. When I give the signal, we shall charge forth and take the base by force!”

There was a murmur of approval among the crowd as they were keeping their volume to a minimum to keep their location secret.

Loki bit back pain at his brother’s ‘grand master plan’, as Darcy would call it. They were as good as dead if this kept up. It was so distinctly Asgardian to use that method. Circle the offenders and take them by sheer force and numbers, a masterful fight that required only a sword and the desire to see your enemy impaled on the end.

Disgusted and majorly offended, Loki grabbed Thor’s shoulder, pulling him aside. “Brother, this plan is doomed to fail.”

Offended, Thor pushed him away, “How do you mean? It is simple—“

“Precisely,” Loki said in a hushed tone, bringing Thor to the edge of their look-out point to better see the fort. The quicker they got this done, the sooner they could go home and he could make up for lost time with Darcy and Jörmungandr and Fenrir. “It’s too simple and expected. We don’t have enough men to cover this perimeter completely. They would pick us off before we had the opportunity to narrow in on the fort.”

Thor crossed his arms, facing the light breeze so his cape rippled out behind him. The sight made Loki’s lip curl. How an oaf such as Thor could so closely resemble a king was beyond him. “Do you have a better option?”

Loki turned his attention to Fort Stór, noting once more the metal supporting beams and newly cut pine wood. From where he stood, obscured by foliage atop their high plane, he could make out the
paths on which Vanir noble soldiers took their routes. “Yes.” He answered finally, “I do.”

Skeptically, Thor followed his gaze across the plane. “Will it involve mischief?”

“But of course.” Loki said, eyeing Mjolnir with particular interest.

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“Loki, are you sure this is will work?” Thor queried uncertainly for the sixty-seventh time that afternoon.

Loki rolled his eyes, watching as the Asgardians and tribal allies dispersed into the surrounding trees. They would stay off the paths, waiting quietly until the time came to act. He watched keenly as soldiers paced inside the fortress. There were five windows on every side of the four stories. Loki couldn’t see much of the inside, though he could guess that a staircase existed somewhere within.

“Loki—“

“How far can you fly with Mjolnir?” Loki interrupted.

Thor shrugged, weighing the hammer in hand. “You know as well as I. Far enough, I suppose.”

Loki rubbed his chin in thought, remembering the last time he and Thor had measured the distance of his travels by hammer. “The building is simple enough, though heavily guarded. Vanir soldiers are trained much like Aesir, only nimbler. It is easier for them to fight in tight spaces than it will be for you.”

“Stop.” Thor demanded, holding up his hand. “Are you suggesting that I enter the base alone?”

“Yes.” Loki answered obviously, “And—“

“You are not going with me?” he asked, almost hurt.

Frustrated, Loki explained, “I am the distraction. While you make your way to the top of the fort, I will be drawing the men within the fort away from you.”

Thor’s blonde brows came together, crinkling his forehead as he tried to work out Loki’s reasoning. “But there is only one of you.”

Loki smirked, “There will always be only one of me. I am Loki.”

“But, the men—“

“Will stand by, keeping the Vanir nobles circulating the perimeter contained. They will wait to attack until they some running towards the clearing.” Loki clarified.

Thor grit his teeth, “Then what is my purpose?”

“Lightning.” Loki said plainly, gesturing vaguely towards the fort and its four metal supporting pillars.

Catching on, Thor grinned from ear to ear. “Ah, brother. That is clever. But your distraction…” he hesitated, “Is it honorable?”

“Quite.” Loki assured, dismissing his brother’s useless question. Honor was arbitrary, especially in
defeating an enemy. What honor was there in death?

“Would Father approve?” Thor asked, pushing the matter further.

Irked to his very core at the mention of his father, Loki conjured his dagger, holding it firmly in hand. “I don’t need his approval.”

“Loki—“

“Wait here until they are distracted and enough Vanir have fled to the clearing.” Loki directed before magically transporting himself down to the clearing where he faced Fort Stor.

Over the past few months in his tireless search for Infinity stones, Loki had found uses for his magic he would have never thought possible. For instance, if one was venturing through a forest and needed proper disguise, they could change form to be that of a native animal to avoid speculation. If one had enough energy, they could change the area around them to suit their needs. Loki had no need for drastic measures. Changing his appearance would be interesting, but for another time. His goal was to distract and confuse his enemy, and nothing did that better than apparent use of magic around those unfamiliar with it.

With a final glance in the direction of Thor’s current location, he let magic flow from him as he’d been doing his entire life. He no longer needed to think a spell or imagine the ‘magic words’. His mind and body worked in unison to turn his magical desires into reality.

And so, when he cast out his magic, fifty illusionary duplicates of himself began walking across the field towards Fort Stor. He walked with them at a reasonably slow pace as to give Thor more time to get to the fort. Arrows flew towards him, a few piercing his doubles. But his illusions felt no pain, and they kept walking. Loki rather liked this bit of mischief. Not exactly in the sense that he was beating Vanaheim, civil war was an idiotic concept and he felt embarrassed to partake in any part of it.

However, imagining the faces of the archers whose arrows did no damage to oncoming dopplegangers of one of Asgard’s princes…well, that was entertaining to say the least.

The closer he came to the fort, the greater the tension seemed to radiate from the forces within. Shouts erupted, warriors gathered in the windows, and, at last, soldiers began flooding into the clearing to fight Loki and his duplicates.

Victorious, Loki gripped his dagger as the first of his opponents that day came to meet him. It had been a while since he sparred with anyone and the formal maneuvers of the noble Vanir warrior were amusing. Polite, comradely swordsmanship. If this man were to fight against elves, or someone truly wishing to do him harm, he’d already be dead.

In the midst of the new battle, with Vanir men trying their best to defeat Loki’s dagger-wielding duplicates and Loki himself being enormously humored by the whole event, the whirl of Thor’s hammer could be heard over head. Loki looked up from his fight just in time to see a flash of red as his brother flew to the top of Fort Stor.

Panic ensued.

In mere seconds, the fort was on fire. The first crack of lightning brought an ear-shattering clash of thunder that stunned the Vanir noblemen he was fighting. Once they were distracted by Thor’s heroics, Loki disappeared, taking his duplicates with him.
The second crash of lightning sent flaming splinters of wood across the clearing, knocking unsuspecting men to the ground.

Loki walked around them, finding some deep seated satisfaction in the chaos. There was something profoundly magnificent about watching things burn. To see a work of art, a monument, a structure made to protect, be destroyed in a matter of minutes fascinated him. Not in the sense that he wanted to start annihilating civilizations left and right, he had no desire to cause anyone pain.

But like any good mischief, chaos was a delicacy, only to be had on special occasions. Though he hated to admit it, Loki understood Thor’s need to fight. He had the power of the storm at his fingertips, constantly itching to be used.

Loki had the power to cause any amount of trouble he liked. But he was constantly faced with the question of what he wanted to make trouble of. He wished to wreak havoc on someone’s system, watch their confusion as he tears the rug out from beneath them. Perhaps it was a flaw with Asgardians, or perhaps it was just him. It was so rare that he ever truly felt satisfied with anything.

The third clash of lightning struck the fortress, sending smoke and fire blazing towards the sky. Loki waited for the Asgardian troops and tribal members to back into the clearing, to fight off the Vanir nobles.

Patiently waiting for the true action to begin, Loki stared down at one of the capital fighters that had fled the fortress upon Thor’s electric opening. He was dead and burnt, a look of horror seared onto his face. It put a bitter taste in his mouth. Was this the price of his and Thor’s entertainment? Did honor truly have to cost lives? Say what one would about respecting those in battle; at least mayhem and trickery need not kill to be done properly.

Even though mischief was indeed his self-righteous and demanding mistress, Darcy was his love. She was his life partner and his balance. In the worst of times, she kept him sane. He was not bored with Darcy, even when they did nothing for hours on end. She was enough. Her laugh, her smile, the silly things she said….With Darcy, he didn’t feel the need to make mischief.

Sure the simple tricks that left people mildly annoyed and cursing him for all that he was were always a given. But he had no desire to do anything majorly destructive.

While Loki disagreed with his father on most matters, he must agree that having a woman in one’s life did help to settle them. Perhaps Thor did need a woman. Not Sigyn, that’s a match made in Hel. But someone. Who would dare fall for that oaf, Loki did not know. Gods help her.

The fourth bout of lightning struck the fortress and it fell in a scorching heap, setting patches of grass on fire with every gentle pulse of the wind.

From the east side of the clearing, Fandrall emerged, closely followed by Hogun and Volstagg, all three of them panting in utter horror.

Loki paused for a moment, dagger in hand as they ran towards him. Surely these mighty warriors of Asgard would not flee from a fight.

That’s when it happened.

From all sides of the clearing came only a fraction of the Asgardian troops Loki had sent off. Closely following them were the Vanir noble warriors who had been scoping the perimeter. Chasing the two were their tribal allies, their faces adorning the same bloodthirsty glower.

The few straggling Asgardians were cut down with brutal force as Loki strove to make sense of the
situation. Thor landed in a blur beside his friends, and he quickly asked them what was happening. Loki doubted they knew.

From where he stood he could feel the thick, sweaty sensation of ceremonial tribal magic. It was old, practically ancient in practice, but he identified it nonetheless. He’d studied these forms in his youth when Frigga was still educating him on inter-realm magical uses. This one in particular was of a ceremonial breed to be used strictly for battle. Sometimes before the fight, the chief of the tribe would perform a magical ceremony and during the fight he or she would enact the spell. The members of the tribe would then be overcome with a single-minded purpose.

As of now it seemed this purpose was to kill all of the Asgardians.

“Should we fight them?!” Fandrall shouted, drawing his sword as the tribes advanced. A few of them engaged the other Vanir in combat, but mostly their targets seemed to be the Asgardians near the burning remains of Fort Stor.

Loki’s thoughts immediately went to Darcy.

No doubt the spell had been enacted within her quadrant as well. Sif was there to protect her, but was Sif enough? He needed to find her. In what world would he live if Darcy Lewis died in battle?

Hogun shook his head, “I do not know.”

“This is treachery!” Volstagg growled, angling his axe towards the impending hoard.

Loki grit his teeth, making quick eye contact with Thor as an understanding passed through them.

Things had gone very, very wrong. General Hervingr was no doubt dead (good riddance) and the other groups were probably not too well off. They must fight if they desired to live another day.

They nodded in unison, turning their backs to one another to face the oncoming wave of magically enhanced warriors. He would kill these bastards as quickly and as mercilessly as possible so he could find his lady.

Magic flowed through every pore of Loki’s body as he surged forth towards the throng of painted, deadly tribal warriors. They lunged at him with hammers, swords and axes and he fought back with his daggers.

During his time searching for the Infinity Stones, not only had he learned more uses of magic, but he also put his skills in combat to use. Loki knew a very long time ago that he fought nothing like Thor. His brother was strong enough to land a blow and conquer an opponent with sheer force and a blunt, magical object.

Loki implemented more finesse into his style. Even though had a great deal more strength now than he did as a child, he preferred his dagger. Not that he liked killing exactly, but the shorter weapon required more skill and made each death of his opponents more intimate.

So, he surged onwards, killing with blind purpose. He needed to get to Darcy as soon as possible. After he found her, they would have to sort out the mess that had happened. There was a traitor in their midst and something told him Darcy would want in on finding the perpetrator.

That is, if Darcy was still alive.

Quickly, he banished the thought from his head, grabbing the ponytail of the tribal man trying to
impale him on a spear. Loki twisted his head, relishing in the snap of his neck and the slick sound of steel against the flesh of his throat.

A spell kept the blood off his blade and clothing, so when he thrust his knife into the lung of an unsuspecting enemy, not a drop of red wet his hands. Thor might say it was dishonorable, but Loki found it rather sensible.

He was quickly moving through the immeasurable number of soldiers when he saw her.

Darcy Lewis.

She was in the clearing, her bun had come loose and a messy array of curls danced around her face as she fought off teams of warriors. Her swords glinted in the midday light, blood spattering the blades and her face.

She was a goddess, in every sense of the word.

And she was his.

Bloodlust was quickly turning over to actual lust and Loki threw his dagger into the head of his nearest opponent as he started to make his way across the clearing to the woman he’d ridiculously feared he’d never see again.

There was a moment where everything but the two of them fell away.

Darcy looked up from her fight after pulling her right sword out of a man’s heart. Her eyes met his and he could feel the relief sweeping over her. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her right then and there. He wanted to her presence, her assurance. They were together…they were safe.

And, of course, that’s when things turned sour.

Darcy’s relief, in the matter of a second, morphed from reassured to horror-struck. He couldn’t hear her scream his name, but he saw her lips move. Confused, he stepped towards her, surprising himself when he stumbled.

Darcy was pushing her way through the masses, a tall, dark skinned woman fending off attackers with all but casual flicks of her wrist and a long, green tinted sword.

She called his name again, and this time, he felt a dull pain spread through his abdomen. In a dazed stupor, he glanced down at his stomach to find the sharp head of a glittering, golden arrow protruding from his body.

He didn’t have time to curse himself as he fell to his knees, completely and utterly weak. He could feel poison moving through his body, numbing his senses and threatening to stifle his consciousness. Grappling at what little control he had over his magic, he did what he could, saving his body from the worst of it. But before he could even remove the arrow from his body, he lost control.

Darcy knelt beside him, her face panicked, eyes brimming with terror, her bottom lip trembling with dread. He couldn’t feel her touch, but he knew it was there. On his pulse, over his heart, his wrists, his hands.

She called his name, though he was sure he couldn’t hear her.

She stroked his hair, looking around for help.
Loki couldn’t really be bothered to care. He wondered if this was death, could she be his Valkyrie?

He fought the blackness that threatened to take his sight, bringing his hand shakily to her face. He needed to see her. It was, as if, suddenly, Darcy’s eyes were the only important thing he had in the world. Maybe they’d always been and he’d just been too lost to realize it.

“D-Darcy.” He choked out her name, coughing on blood. He felt cold. It wasn’t uncomfortable, in fact, it felt almost natural. “Darcy…”

She held his hand to her face, his fingers leaving bright red streaks across her cheek. “I’m here, Lokes. Stay with me, Loki. Please. Just a little longer. You promised me you wouldn’t die, you little shit. Don’t break that fucking promise now.”

He thanked the gods for her voice and smiled at the sound, “I love you.”

Then everything went black.

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Darcy’s entire being trembled as she struggled to keep herself grounded.

Loki

He couldn’t be…

The golden arrow in his stomach glinted in the light, its sharpened edges clear of blood.

Body shaking with a sick mixture of shock and disbelief, Darcy willed the unthinkable away.

Loki was hard to kill. He was too stubborn.

She gaped down at him, wrought speechless by the blood wetting his lips and the still, lifelessness of his body on the grass.

Chaos raged around them, Tara fighting off every offender that came towards Darcy with blinding precision. In the distance she could hear the clash of Thor’s hammer and Volstagg’s battle cries.

But her attention was on the arrow and it’s bright golden glare.

In the midst of the battle, the stifling heat of war, Darcy peered through the ashy, smoky haze. Per usual, everything was blurry. She couldn’t see far without her glasses. The world was a blur of color, accentuated by sharp flares of the flaming fortress in the distance and the sun reflecting off different hues of armor.

But, in that moment, it seemed that whatever cruel gods existed out in the great beyond were not in her favor.

Just in the distance, she saw him, adorned in unmistakable golden armor that glowered like sick, tar-thick honey in the hot sun. From a distance, Darcy could feel his mockery.

Darcy could honestly she’d never really wanted to kill anyone before. She was sure she would have remembered. Because the sensation of wanting someone dead, the blood on your hands, the life leaving their eyes…it was incomparable to anything she’d ever felt.

She wanted High Lord Bjarte dead, and she wanted to be the one to kill him.
Seething, shimmering, shining with rage, Darcy stood, dropping Loki’s lifeless hand. In a blind rush of fury, she shoved her way through falling bodies, casting aside lives to avenge the one that meant something to her. Because war was bloody and, after a while, she was bound to get her hands dirty.

She wasn’t far away before she could hear his laughter, smooth and sweet. It was noxious, in every sense of the world.

Lord Bjarte appeared from the mass of bodies, sword in hand, a wicked, shit eating grin on his bearded face. “The truth will reveal itself now, girl.”

Wrought with devastation and anger, Darcy drew her swords and lashed out of him. He blocked her advance casually, brushing her off with a humored glance. “You really are weak aren’t you? You’re weaker than your false prince.”

Again, she lunged at him, mind and body humming with every ounce of grief she didn’t know how to feel. “Shut up!” she demanded, livid tears running down her cheeks.

He blocked her attempts again, this time countering her with an attack. She blocked it, throwing all of her weight into fending off his blow. It was an ineloquent move, not nearly balanced enough. Bjarte took the opportunity to strike at her again, this time the heavy blade of his sword made contact with her upper arm.

The steel pierced the leather of her armor and almost immediately Darcy could feel hot blood trickling down her arm. She wasn’t sure if her scream was from pain, anger, sadness or a bit of all three.

Bjarte chuckled darkly, pacing around her as the battle raged on. None of the tribal fighters bothered them, seemingly absorbed in killing off the remaining Asgardians.

“Did you really think this could stay a secret forever?” Bjarte inquired mockingly, his sword pointed at her neck as he walked circles around her.

Darcy choked on her rage, curiosity managing to sneak it’s way into her mind. “What are you talking about?! You killed him!”

The words came out before she could stop them. And just as soon as they were spoken, Darcy suddenly didn’t want to hold up her swords any longer. She didn’t want to fight or go back to Midgard or Asgard…

She wanted to go home.

Bjarte grinned cruelly at her, charging towards her and, with a single swipe of his sword, knocked her free of her weapons. Her swords, both gifts from Loki, fell upon the burning grass, bloody and beautiful, just like their creator.

Bjarte took advantage of her unresponsiveness, wrapping one of his leather gloved hands around her neck.

Darcy knew Asgardians were strong. She was met with their strength in battle daily. But she often forgot how much stronger they were than her. High Lord Bjarte was doing fairly well in reminding her just how very weak she was.

His fingers squeezed around her throat, lifting her from the ground, bringing her face close enough to his that she could smell the sickly sweet honey on his breath. Her body and mind were in
disagreement. While her body choked and coughed, struggling for air, her eyes stayed locked on his. He was humored. Victorious. Relishing in her loss.

“Do not worry yourself, Lady Darcy.” He said, pulling her closer to whisper in her ear. “I have not killed your prince. I won’t have to.”

Musterings as much air as she could, Darcy gave her breath to one last insult. “You’re a monster.”

“Oh,” Bjarte uttered in a low, menacing voice, “I’m not the monster, Lady Darcy. You—“

His words were cut short by the heavy ‘clang’ of metal against metal. In a second, Bjarte dropped her. Air rushed back into her lungs, only to be pushed out again by the weight of the High Lord when he fell upon her.

Darcy struggled with every ounce of her strength to kick an unconscious Lord Bjarte off of her badly beaten self. He was out cold, a square-shaped dent in his helm.

A collection of hands worked to move him away and Darcy looked up with unfocused vision to see the fuzzy ripple of a red cape and bright shine of Mjolnir. Through the haze that was her sight, Darcy saw the tribal fighters all fallen to the earth along with Bjarte, weapons discarded beside them.

It didn’t take long for her to find her fallen prince amongst the crowd.

Shakily, she got to her feet, ever muscle protesting the needs of her conscious mind. Stumbling over dismembered limbs and chunks of burning wood, Darcy made her way across the short distance between them.

When she was close enough that she could make out the details of his face and armor, the rest of the battle field disappeared. Darcy quickened her pace, mind stuffy and numb, all her actions centered around one thought: She wanted Loki.

She made it as close as she could to him before her legs gave out, her oxygen deprived muscles willing her body to meet the ground.

She fell between two singed patches of grass, her head landing with a heavy thud in the space of grass between his shoulder and head.

Everything was silent. With the fire of battle having died, there was nothing to hear but the slow, faint beat of a heart.

The sound soothed Darcy, her every fiber relaxing at its reliable rhythm. And with that final assurance, she followed Loki into nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

HAHAHA! HOW DO YOU LIKE ME NOW! I COME BACK, I MAKE THEM KISS, AND I LOW-KEY COMMIT MURDER!
Jk, they're not actually dead. They're just sleeping.

So, per usual, I have a few short things to say about this chapter. First off, I'd like to thank Surya (@taserfox on tumblr) for beta reading this for me.
You da best, gurl. She's super cool and helped me with my grammar. Because I'm bad at that shit.

Next, I kind of write long-ish chapters. I'm aware of this. So, if you were reading through this chapter and all of the stuff about Vananheim and the magic and the Meiri sounded familiar but it didn't quite click, the beginning of Chapter 26 addresses a few of these things. Also, some stuff about Lord Bjarte and his threats are mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 28. If you feel like ya need some extra reference, those are a couple places to look.

You should also totally ask me questions if you're confused, because sometimes I feel like some of the things I write are confusing. Idk. Maybe it's just me. I'm here, nonetheless!

Okay, slightly unrealated, but would you just look at these two nuggets for a second:

*sigh* so perfect. such art. lovely.

Thank you so much for reading, sorry again about how long it took. My brain... it's a crazy fucking hellhole but with more rainbows and otp kissing.
Chapter Summary

Loki is unconscious. Darcy is freaking out. Tyr...sweet little cinnamon bun too good for this cruel world. Frigga is sad. Sigyn and Baldur are cool.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Baldur studied the coals in his forge, watching them change colors. It was morning, but the harsh winter season had left a lingering cold in the night. It would take a while for the forge to get warm enough to fill his daily orders.

The morning was silent for the most part. The gentle cascade of the waterfall stirred the lake just outside the edge of his shop. Sunlight was just beginning to peek over to the trees. Behind him, small, busy steps could be heard as his apprentice moved about.

It was still early, most of Asgard had not even begun to move from their beds, but Sigyn was awake.

Baldur was surprised by how much he actually liked the girl. He found that she shared very few of her parent’s unlikable traits. She wasn’t loud or boisterous like his other apprentices. She did what he asked, occasionally inquiring on the purpose of her tasks.

But her compliance isn’t what Baldur liked about her. It was nice not to constantly mind to some whiny boy, but any lady would be somewhat more compliant than any Lord’s son.

Baldur liked Sigyn because she wasn’t nice.

It wasn’t hard to tell. She wasn’t cruel or spiteful, but she wasn’t some kind hearted, frivolous, loud mouthed capital brat either. She was reserved, embittered, perhaps somewhat angry, and she was entirely focused on the work he gave her.

Of course, since yesterday, she seemed more finicky than usual. She’d dropped a pile of stones last night and nearly tripped over an axe this morn.

He turned around to see the blonde lady, dressed in leather pants and a brown tunic, both tailored for women but slightly too big for her. She stood across the cave, stacking cinder blocks near his workbench.

Over the course of her apprenticeship, which she’d obtained nearly three seasons ago, he’d been giving her rather menial tasks. She wasn’t strong enough at first to even wield a hammer. Her first jobs consisted mostly of organizing his deliveries and fetching him tools from the shed. It had been a long time since Baldur had even begun to train anyone worth his craft.

Eventually, it became clear to him that to become a blacksmith, Sigyn would need to learn how he had.

He sent her out to mine stone.
Baldur knew himself that it was a miserable, tedious task. Finding specific rocks, dirts and gravels, mining them and shaping them into bricks was a job he despised above all. But there was value in it. Using the tools to dig up the stones would build strength, identifying natural materials would familiarize Sigyn with metals, and shaping bricks would help to build her own forge sometime soon.

She would need her own forge. Every good blacksmith built their own. Anyone who did otherwise didn’t know the first thing about how to make a weapon.

Sigyn was doing well. She didn’t know the first thing about blacksmithing, but she had a keen eye for certain materials. It took her almost no time at all to learn which minerals melted down into certain metals and where to find the strongest wood.

Baldur would have to write Frigga soon and thank her for bringing him an apprentice worth the effort.

“Master Baldur.” Sigyn said, walking to his side.

He turned to her as she held a scroll out to him. “A raven came for you. It’s from the Allmother. It’s marked as an urgent matter.”

Baldur nodded once, holding his hands above the coals of his forge as they heated. “Read it to me.”

She made a face, turning the letter over in her hands, “Can’t you read it yourself?”

“Course I can.” Baldur said gruffly, hefting himself off his stool to read through the new orders he’d gotten that day. “I just don’t like to.”

After considering his response for a moment, Sigyn began to read. “‘Dearest Baldur and Lady Sigyn, I am writing to you both with rather urgent news about…’” Sigyn paused for a moment, causing Baldur to stop his shuffling through orders.

“…About the war?” Baldur finished, raising a brow.

Sigyn nodded once, reading on almost stoically. Her voice didn’t waver again. “‘There has been a traitor in Asgard’s midst. During battle, over half of the men were slain by the tribes. The noble Vanir refuse to grant the Asgardians refuge for fear of further bloodshed and the Allfather has banned all communication between realms until the traitor has been discovered.’”

“By the gods…” Baldur growled, pounding his fist on his work table in frustration. Any other day, he would say Odin have it coming to him. He sent almost a full battalion out to Vanaheim with no one leading but two boys who’ve lived in a palace their entire lives and a general who is so full of shit, it comes out his mouth.

Sigyn continued reading, “‘And now onto the part of this that most deeply concerns me and that I ask your help with.’”

Baldur watched Sigyn’s usually clear and composed face contort into that of worry. “‘Both Loki and Darcy have been gravely injured. I am not permitted to send any healers to Vanaheim because of the Allfather’s ban of inter-realm travel and, to the best of our knowledge, no healer exists in the remaining Asgardian ranks with the proper qualifications to heal them. Thor believes Darcy should wake soon, as he wrote in his letter to me earlier this morn. Loki has been poisoned by a very similar weapon he was attacked with on Skornheim a while back.’”
Baldur froze, standing up straighter. Sigyn noticed his change in demeanor and stopped reading. The arrow. The golden arrow? The ones made of Valkyrie hide?

After the attempted assassination on Prince Loki’s life, Darcy had brought him the arrow, asking if he recognized it.

Of course he did. He made the arrow. Hel, he made the whole damn set. He lost them soon after The Dark War against the elves. It didn’t seem right that he should keep them after that. It had been centuries since he’d even thought about them until little Lady Darcy presented him with one.

“Go on.” He directed Sigyn.

Her eyes narrowed on him for a moment before she continued. “It is clear that Loki is being targeted. The Allfather has allowed for one representative from Asgard to be sent to Vanaheim. I need as much information as possible on the weapon so that this representative might pass it onto Lady Darcy. I have not heard from her, but there is no doubt that she will be leading the investigation to find the traitor. Have the information to me as soon as possible. Most Gratefully, Queen of the Realm Eternal, Frigga Allmother.”

She turned the page over, eyes widening only slightly. Relief swept over her as she read. “Post Statement: Only men have died.”

Sigyn finished and Baldur studied her seriously for a moment. “You alright, kid?”

She sighed heavily, re-reading the page. “I’m better than I was.”

Baldur figured that the Queen’s post statement was for his apprentice, being that he didn’t really understand it. Other than Advisor Darcy, he wasn’t aware of any women going to battle. The last powerful woman he’d known to have fought in a war…well…she was long gone. A Valkyrie herself.

It wasn’t any of his business, so he didn’t ask. But any woman that went among the men to fight had his respect. Being a warrior was a competition, and to be a woman in said competition was to raise the stakes considerably.

Perhaps this woman was Sigyn’s friend. He would say sister, but he couldn’t see any of High Lord and Lady of Jolena’s daughters heading off to battle.

Sigyn approached his workbench, setting down the letter. “What is this weapon the Queen speaks of?”

Her question shook him from his thoughts as he considers how much to tell her. He saw no reason not to educate Sigyn on the Valkyrie hide, as she was his apprentice after all. And Queen Frigga certainly seemed to trust her with the knowledge.

Baldur scratched his beard, frowning down at the little blonde lady. Now that he thought about it, he trusted her a great deal. It was a similar kind of trust he had for Advisor Darcy. They had no ill intentions. They just were.

Nodding to himself, having decided upon what he was about to do, Baldur began walking towards his shop’s private chambers. He gestured for Sigyn to follow. “C’mon, kid, lesson time.”

Baldur didn’t like to keep anything of value in the shop upstairs. He left that area unattended, anything could be stolen. He hardly kept any of the parcels he made based on value and he never made anything that someone didn’t specifically order. He had his own armor and axe which he
kept in a closet inside his sleeping chambers.

However, if one were to follow the carved, torch lit tunnel of his cave past his rooms, they would come upon a heavy wooden door at the end of the corridor with a series of chunky gears inlaid patterned across the surface. They kept the door secure, as the cogs formed a puzzle very few could solve.

He and Sigyn stood before it, the brass gears gleaming under the flickering light of the torches that never dimmed. He began to turn them with purpose, respectfully remembering she who’d helped him create the pattern and she whom the vault was built for.

Sigyn watched him skeptically, her thin, bony arms hanging at her sides. She’d gotten thinner since she began working for him. He’d have to make sure she ate more. For a small second, he was embarrassed that he hadn’t noticed her unhealthiness sooner. Then he remembered that he wasn’t her mother.

Not that her mother gave a damn about her anyways.

The click of the vault’s lock cleared the thoughts away and with a solid shove, he pushed the door open.

Stale air met his nose and he crinkled his nose as the torches within magically lit.

Before him were Baldur’s true treasures. He had only three.

The first, to the far left of the chamber was a war hammer of his own creation. It was simpler, one of his earlier makings. But it was well balanced and neatly crafted. It was silver with a tan leather grip. Unlike most war hammers, it wasn’t bulky and was much smaller. While the handle was still long and made for reach, it was very clearly built for someone of smaller stature.

To the far right of the room was a door that led to his private docs. Therein lay his ship, Hringhorni, built by his grandfather and enhanced by his mother and father before him.

Then, in the very center of the room, pushed against the wall and covered in a layer of dust, was a chest.

It was fairly plain, with dark worn wood and a latch whose gears matched that of the door.

Baldur didn’t let his gaze linger on the hammer as he approached the chest, Sigyn in his wake.

As he got to his knees to open the chest, Sigyn examined the room. “Where does the door lead?”

The blacksmith scowled as he carefully turned the smaller gears with his thick, calloused fingers. “Dirt. And worms. For my garden.”

“You don’t have a garden.” Sigyn pointed out obviously.

“What do you know?” Baldur growled bitterly as the lock clicked open. He lifted the lid easily, calling Sigyn’s attention away from the door. “You ready to learn somethin’?”

“No, Master Baldur. I followed you here for no purpose but to walk.” She replied with a sarcastic smirk.

Baldur nodded appreciatively. “Come up with that all on your own?”

“Yes.” She said, far too cheerily.
Baldur let out a gruff chuckle, waving her down affectionately. “C’mere, you mouthy shit.”

She sunk to her knees, peering into the chest, her eyes settling on its contents.

Hundreds of gems, of all shapes and colors no larger than his thumbnail filled the chest, each one glinting dully in the muted light. Sitting atop the mess was a leather bound notebook that Baldur had not touched in many years.

“Do you know what they are?” Baldur asked her, sincerely doubting she knew the proper answer.

Sigyn shook her head only slightly. “Crystals of some nature.”

“You’re not wrong.” Baldur clarified, cautiously lifting the book from the mass of jewels. “Have you ever seen a star die?”

“No.” Sigyn said, watching intently as Baldur lifted a gem.

He squeezed the book in hand. “Well then, Lady Sigyn, you haven’t ever been scared. They’re absolutely chaotic. If you get caught at the heart, you’ll end up on the other side of Yggdrasil with nothing but your name.”

“You speak from experience.”

“Absolutely.” Baldur assured, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “When the Allfather asked that I forge Mjolnir in the heart of a dying one, I almost told him to get some other idiot blacksmith to go do it. Of course, I’m the only one lacking the brains to go build weapons in the middle of a dying star.”

He chuckled to himself and Sigyn smiled, tapping her fingers on the edge of the chest. “What do these have to do with the weapon that hurt Loki?”

“I was getting to that,” Baldur said, holding up a purplish gem for her to see. “If you break a stone, what happens?”

Sigyn stared at him blankly for a moment. “It splits. Occasionally it turns to pebbles.”

Baldur waved a finger at her, “Yes. What more?”

“There is no more.”

“You are wrong.”

Her brow puckered and she glared at him, “There is dust.”

“Good.” Baldur praised shortly. “When you break a stone, there is dust. And when you break a star, you get these.”

“Stardust.” Sigyn simplified.

Baldur shrugged. “Sure. Dumb name if you ask me, but whatever helps you to remember. Now, what do you think a blacksmith would use them for?”

“Weapons.” She answered plainly, as if the answer were that easy.

Baldur gave her a look. “Use your imagination, why don’t you.”
Sigyn huffed, leaning over the chest, her brow creasing as she considered the gems. Slowly, she reached into the container and retrieved one of the gems.

“Careful.” He warned as she turned it over in her fingers.

“Does it...” she cocked her head to the side in an almost endearing way, focused on the gem. She was about to finish her statement when she halted her speech, giving a small cry of pain as the crystal sliced her thumb.

Baldur reacted immediately as the flesh of her hand began to change to a deadly shade of purple. Her eyes widened in shock, but no sound escaped her mouth.

Hastily, Baldur took the lady in his massive arms as she shook with the sudden jolt of poison to her system.

Baldur could not recall the last time he’d felt so concerned for another person, or anything for that matter.

He slung her over his shoulder, rushing the two of them back back to the forge, not hesitating to throw his apprentice into the clear, sunlit lake.

She emerged in no time, soaking wet and gasping for air. She held her hand up to the light, frantically examining the cut that had turned her skin purple. Her skin had gone back to its normal pallor, save her face which was red from sputtering water.

“What the Hel was that?” she demanded, unamused.

Baldur knelt by the water, offering her his hand. She swam to the edge of the lake, accepting his help. As soon as she was out, she moved to stand by his forge so the heat could dry her.

Baldur handed her the leather bound book he’d written himself. “The crystals are lethally poisonous to Asgardians and Dark Elves. The only thing with the power to heal its blow that I’ve found is healing waters.”

Healing waters were something of myths on Asgard. There are stories of mysterious ponds and lakes scattered throughout the realm with the powers to heal any physical wound. Baldur had found one and built his forge beside it. He never told anyone about the water’s properties, but he didn’t really keep it a secret either. The water wouldn’t heal anyone unless they were completely immersed in it.

Sigyn stared at him, shaking her head only slightly. “Why?”

He held out his hands, palms up. “During the war with The Dark War, Bor wanted a weapon that would change the war. He wanted to be sure Asgard would win and the Age of Light would not die out so soon. I came up with these.”

Standing beside her, he opened the book, pointing to several golden diagrams and instructions he’d written regarding the material. “If you grind down the crystals and smelt them with a combination of steels and Asgardian gemstones, they turn golden and can be shaped just as any metal. I call the compound Valkyrie Hide.”

Sigyn flipped through the pages of his book, stopping on a sketch of a rather large, lethal looking sword. “You made weapons from it?”

“No.” Baldur answered, “I made one weapon and soon after…” he trailed off, thinking back to
what compelled him to stop. “soon after Asgard beat Malekith and I saw no reason to continue.”

“What was the weapon?” She asked, wiping away a small droplet of water that had fallen from her hair onto the book.

“A bow and a set of twelve arrows.” Baldur told her, turning to his sketches of the project.

Sigyn frowned at the picture, tracing the shape of an arrowhead with her finger. “This is what someone used to try and assassinate Loki.”

“Apparently.” Baldur muttered, brow furrowing. “I don’t know how they got hold of it, but if Prince Loki got hit with one of these, it’s a miracle he’s still alive.”

His apprentice grit her teeth in thought and Baldur waited for her to tell him her thoughts. She’d gotten increasingly better at speaking her mind to him. At first, he could hardly get her to say anything.

She tapped the page thoughtfully. “Loki was hit with it before in Skornheim. He wasn’t poisoned then. Darcy claims he healed himself.”

Baldur studied his own writings, thinking about how much would be useful to the Queen and Advisor Darcy. “Then perhaps Prince Loki is a better sorcerer than we give him credit for.”

Sigyn turned the page once more and stiffened.

“Alright there, kid?” he asked, clapping her on the shoulder, examining the page to see what had shocked her. It wasn’t anything different. Just a few sketches of armor he’d drawn for a woman, constructed wholly out of Valkyrie Hide.

“Fine.” She answer shakily. “Just cold.”

Baldur nodded, scrutinizing her sopping garments. “I might have something you can change into for the time being. Keep reading that; start writing things down that could be useful.”

***

Tyr stood anxiously by a window, staring out over the capital city, vaguely listening as Frigga read aloud Prince Thor’s letter for the tenth time that morning. Fenrir and Jörmungandr were circling each other worriedly.

Odin had sent him a raven earlier that morning claiming that he was needed in the capital and there was no other man for the job. He came as soon as he could, flying at dangerous speeds to get to the King’s attendance. Upon his arrival, Odin informed him of the terrible predicament on Vanaheim and asked that he be the correspondent between realms.

Tyr agreed, ready to serve Asgard in any way he could.

After his meeting with the Allfather, Frigga had whisked him away to a leisure room, offered him breakfast and company while he waited for someone to bring him information that would hopefully help in Darcy’s search for the traitor amongst the Asgardians.

He found her presence very soothing, for he was most concerned for his friends.

Both Darcy and Loki were injured in battle, Loki having been targeted specifically. Thor did not speak of Sif, which he supposed was a good thing. At least his sister was safe.
“Tyr, darling, come sit down.” Frigga chided to him gently, “Eat. You don’t know when you’ll get fed well again.”

Unable to help himself, Tyr smiled, warmed to his very core at her care. Though he had no right, Tyr saw the Queen as the closest thing to a mother he would ever have. She had always been kind to him and he respected her deeply.

“If you insist, your highness.” He took his seat across from her on a long, comfy sofa, accepting a plate of bread, fruit, honey, eggs, and juice.

Frigga gave him a look, “Tyr, if you call me ‘Your Highness’ one more time I will kill you myself, never mind the dangers of Vanaheim.”

Grinning ear to ear, Tyr placed his fist over his heart, “Of course, Your Majesty.”

She sighed in mock exasperation, smirking back at him. “I’ve missed you Tyr. Visit me more often.”

“Visit me!” Tyr suggested, quickly swallowing a mouthful of bread smothered in honey. “I swear, Darcy and Loki are the only ones who come out to Thryheim anymore.” Fenrir whined at him and Jörmungandr looked pleadingly at the bit of meat on his plate. Tyr fed it to him with a teasing grin, “And these two of course.”

“Of course.” Frigga agreed, watching as the animals shared the meat with surprising delicacy. They made sure either one of them got an equal amount. No doubt Darcy taught them manners. It seemed like something she would do, crazy girl.

Tyr’s heart started aching all over again. The last thing he wanted was for Darcy and Loki to die. He wondered if they’d made up yet. He knew they’d been feuding over the past few seasons. Loki had been off doing whatever in the galaxy.

What if one of them died before they came to their senses and kissed already? How horrible would that be? Had they not been his friends, he would be swooning over how beautifully tragic it all was. Unless, of course, they had kissed. In which case it was even more tragic because no sooner had they come to their senses, death tore them apart.

To stop his internal dilemma from tearing him apart, he took a large bite of an apple.

He ate in silence for a while longer, watching Frank and Jörmungandr communicate with one another. He wouldn’t exactly call it talking. They made sounds, but they weren’t conversing necessarily. It was difficult to explain.

At long last, the doors opened and a lone Einherjar announced the presence of an absolutely gorgeous young lady with long blonde hair and sharp features.

“Lady Sigyn to see you, Your Majesty.” He declared and Frigga dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

Lady Sigyn entered briskly and Tyr quickly set aside his tray, standing to greet her. Though he had never met Lady Sigyn, he’d heard a great deal about her from Darcy. She was a good friend of his sister’s and of his friends.

He liked her already.

At the moment, she wore a plain blue dress and her hair hung free down her back and around her
shoulders. In her hand was a rather thick looking scroll. She stared at him curiously for a moment before curtsying.

“An honor to meet you, High Lord Tyr. And greetings to you, Allmother.” She said, her voice polite, yet terse.

Tyr bowed to her as well, taking her hand in his excitement to finally meet her. “Lady Sigyn, it is my honor to finally meet your acquaintance. I only wish we’d met on better circumstances. Darcy has told me the most charming stories—“

Frigga cleared her throat from the couch, a small, teasing grin on her kind face.

Tyr felt his cheeks get warm and he patted Sigyn’s hand once before releasing it. “Another time perhaps. Once again, under better circumstances…” he trailed off as Sigyn raised a brow at him, humored.

“Indeed.” She agreed, holding out the scroll for him. “This is from Baldur. He wishes it does you well.”

Tyr took it with a gratuitous nod, stowing it carefully in his satchel. “Thank you, Lady Sigyn. I hope so as well.”

Frigga stood, walking over to them. “I’m afraid I have business to attend to, Lord and Lady. I trust I’ve left Tyr in good hands, Sigyn?”

She bowed her head, “Of course, Your Majesty.”

The Allmother placed a gentle hand on the lady’s shoulder, “All will be well, Sigyn. I swear it.”

With that the Queen departed, leaving Tyr to hold back the questions he had for Sigyn. How well did she know his sister? How was she? What did she know about her that Darcy didn’t? Had she found love yet?

Everything he wanted to know bounced around inside his head, but he settled on something more appropriate. “Congratulations, Lady Sigyn, on your betrothal to Prince Thor.”

If he had blinked, Tyr would have missed the minute look of utter disgust on Sigyn’s face before it morphed into something more neutral. “Thank you, Lord Tyr. Would you like accompaniment to the stables? You are taking a horse to the bifrost, are you not?”

“I am.” He said, offering her his arm and she took it as they departed from the room, Jörmungandr and Fenrir following close behind him. “I take it you’re less than eager to be marrying, Thor?”

Sigyn made to protest, but Tyr waved her off. “Oh, don’t lie to me. I know all the dirty secrets. Honestly, I wouldn’t want to marry Thor either. Too much brawn, not enough brain.”

The blonde lady glanced at him skeptically, “Hopefully not all of the secrets?”

He shrugged, “Well, no. Unfortunately. Although, I have been informed that you are also good friends with Lady Sif, as Darcy is?”

Tyr applauded himself internally for such a smooth transition over to talk about his sister.

Sigyn looked up at him hopefully, “You called her ‘Lady’ Sif.”

A blush crept onto his cheeks once more and he cursed himself. “Forgive me. Tis of habit.”
“No, it’s fine.” Sigyn assured with more emotion than he’d heard from her since they met. “I call her that as well. She is a lady.”

“A special kind of lady.” Tyr added with a grin. He hoped and prayed that Sif had found some way to prove herself in this war. If she did, she would finally be a warrior and then they could be reunited.

Sigyn bit her lip, shooting hasty glances up and down the corridor. “Tyr, could you make sure a message gets to her. From me. Please.”

Tyr glanced around nervously, “For what purpose?”

The lady scowled, “For what purpose would I have?”

“Fair point.” He said, “Yes. I will see what I can do.”

“Excellent.” Sigyn said, pulling a neatly folded square of paper from the folds in her dress as they approached the stables. He accepted it, reveling in the smoothness of the paper beneath his fingers and the smell of perfume that rose from the rose patterned stationery.

“Thank you, Lord Tyr.” She sighed, giving his arm a squeeze.

Warmed by her gesture, Tyr wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “You’re very welcome, Lady Sigyn. I shall see you later, yes?”

She smiled, blue eyes glinting with all kinds of mystery. “Of course. Safe travels.”

She left, leaving the scent of roses in her wake.

Tyr pursed his lips, watching as she disappeared around a corner. The note to his sister seemed to burn in his hands.

Now, to be fair, Tyr was not any old fool when it came to love. He had made a study of it. And there were a few things he’d come to learn about small romantic gestures.

Atop that list of romantic gestures were love notes.

No one sent their good friend stationed in the middle of a battlefield perfumed, neatly folded notes written on rose stationery. That had ‘lover’ written all over it.

Needless to say,, Tyr was not any old fool when it came to love. He had made a study of it. And there were a few things he’d come to learn about small romantic gestures.

Besides, he didn’t do it on purpose. The wind opened the letter and he had no choice but to read the loving words from Lady Sigyn to his dearest sister.

*Sif, You damned well better be careful. If you die without kissing me goodbye one last time, I will personally hunt you down in Valhalla and kill you a second time. That being said, I have thought of nothing but you every second you’ve been away. I nearly fell down the stairs this morning wondering whether or not you were safe. My sheets smell of your hair and between them, I feel as though you were still here with me. There are a thousand things I wish to tell you, though I am short on time. I shall leave you with this: I love you. Stay safe, my Heart. Yours always, Sigyn.*

The sound that escaped Tyr’s lips was rather embarrassing if he was going to be honest. The horse
beside him snorted in protest as Tyr clapped his hands together. “Oh, this is perfect. Isn’t it? Look at! Sif has found someone to love her. By the gods, it was meant to be. I can tell. Did you see how in love she seemed?”

The horse was a great deal less enthused than Tyr, but he was hardly bothered. The horse would one day find love as well.

After a moment, Tyr focused on composing himself. There was a war happening and he had been given a very important job. He couldn’t mess it up now by getting emotional over the fact that his baby sister, the one who had given up everything to become a warrior, his baby sister who grew up with loveless parents and harsh rules, his little sunshine that fought her very hardest to become the fiercest warrior Asgard had ever known…

His little sister found love.

“High Lord Tyr, is all well here?” inquired a passing stable hand. “Is this steed suitable for your travels?”

Tyr righted his posture, reminded himself, as he did every day, that he was a High Lord and he should act like one.

“This one should suit me fine, thank you.” He assured the stable hand, waiting by as his horse was prepared. In the time that passed, he contemplated Vanheim and Darcy. He would do everything in his power to help her. For Asgard and for friendship. Till his dying breath, they would find Asgard’s traitor.

As he mounted his horse, Fenrir and Jörmungandr approached, slithering and running around his horse’s hooves excitedly.

“Are you two coming along?” he asked them, grinning at the enthusiastic noises he received in return. “Do you want to go see Darcy and Loki?”

At this they ran even faster, clearly ready to be reunited with their owners.

“Alright then.” Tyr said, snapping his steed’s reigns. “Let’s go then! To Vanheim!”

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Darcy slowly came to consciousness, feeling a cold, wet nose pressed against her cheek. A rough tongue flicked the end of her nose, causing her to make a face.

“Frank, Fenrir. Five more minutes.” She grumbled tiredly, stretching out her hand to grapple at the bed beside her for a snoozing space prince. When her hand came in contact with nothing, she frowned, pulling herself from her sleepy stupor. “Loki…wake up. Wake up or I’ll kiss you and give you all my cooties…” She giggled sleepily to herself. “…again.”

“You know,” said a voice that was definitely not Loki’s, “This really does answer many of my questions about your relationship with Loki. What are ‘cooties’ exactly?”

Darcy’s eyes flew open and she bolted up into a sitting position. In a whirl, she realized several rather displeasing things.

First of all, she was not in her comfy bed at home with lots of pillows and blankets and books. She was in what looked like an underground bunker. The walls were packed dirt and stone with torches built into them. She lay upon a stiff wooden table, a sheet was draped over the lower half of her
Second on the list of displeasing things, there was no Loki beside her. Where was her Loki? She had the overpowering desire to give him lots of kisses and indulge in an extended period of time cuddling.

The thought of kissing Loki brought upon the third displeasing thing, which happened to be all memories of the war she’d just been through hitting her all at once.

“Bjarte.” She breathed, beginning to feel the pain in her body. Her neck hurt and she knew the bruises from where he choked her must look horrific. Her arm throbbed and she dared a glance at it. A bloodstained strip of fabric wound around her upper arm, no doubt concealing a nasty cut. Her armor had been removed and she wore dark purple linen pants and shirt, embroidered with silver on the cuffs and neckline.

Next, her gaze flicked to the person to wake her from her slumber, relieved to see the familiar face of Tyr. Hovering about her sick bed/table were her two favorite trouble makers.

“Tyr…” Darcy began, still slightly disoriented, “Why are you here? What…what’s happening?"

Tyr’s kind face fell slightly as he gently touched the side of her face, his eyes following what she believed to the her wounds. With a frown, he pulled the sheet around her body, wrapping her in the coarse material. “I shall explain in a moment. How are you feeling?"

“Like I got run over by a herd of bilgesnipe.” She admitted as he poured her a cup of water from the table behind him. He helped her drink, holding the side of her face as she gulped down as much as I could. When she was finished, she felt mildly better. “How long have I been out?""n

He set the cup down, taking her hand as Fenrir leapt onto the table to better lick her face and whine sorrowfully at the wound on her arm. “Almost a full day.”

He went to the back of a chair on which her armor was neatly draped over. She watched as he picked up each article and helped her into her armor piece by piece, taking the time to figure out how each buckle connected and how it fit together. Her heart warmed at Tyr’s help; he was truly one of her best friends.

As he finished buckling together the last of her armor, she waited for him to elaborate on the happenings of the war when a thought came to her.

“Tyr, where’s Loki?”

The lines on his face deepened, his frown making him look older than Darcy ever could have imagined. “He’s alive, Darcy. But…”

She stood, nearly collapsing when her feet hit the floor. Tyr took her shoulders, helping to steady her.

“Take me to him.” She demanded, her mind spinning with her sudden lightheadedness. “Take me to him now and tell me everything. Don’t spare any details.”

“Of course, Darcy.” Tyr assured, wrapping an arm around her waist, helping her to walk. “This way.”

They were very clearly underground. It smelled earthy, but the area was dry and as clean as she imagined underground could be. Frank wrapped around Tyr’s shoulders, his head resting atop
Darcy’s as means of comfort.

They hustled as fast as Tyr allowed them to go down a hallway lit with torches and smelling of musk. Several doors were scattered along the hall, each one holding another mystery.

Finally they came to the end of the corridor. A door marked with a strip of green fabric impeded their passage and Tyr pushed it open with one arm.

Darcy was inside before he could help her and her heart stuttered at what she saw.

On a table similar to her own in the center of the room lie Prince Loki of Asgard. Someone had removed his armor and tunic. His stomach was wrapped in a strip of white cloth, a spot of red bled through the fabric.

Holding her breath, Darcy stumbled towards him, shakily reaching for his wrist. His skin was cold, colder than it should have been, but his pulse was there. Faint, but his heart beat nonetheless.

“Tell me everything.” She muttered, brushing locks of hair off Loki’s forehead. He was freezing, but there were no blankets or sheets as far as she could see.

Tyr hesitated a moment before finally giving in.

“According to Thor, High Lord Bjarte nearly choked the life out of you when Thor beat his helm with Mjolnir. Bjarte was unconscious for a few hours, long enough for Thor to put him in cuffs and keep him properly restrained. He claims you attacked him and he was exhibiting self-defense.”

Darcy’s cloudy mind was sharpening with anger and fear as Loki remained unresponsive to her touch. “Bullshit.”

“That’s what I said.” Tyr agreed, anxiously moving about the room behind her. “Thor went to the noble capital to try and call a temporary truce.”

“He didn’t surrender?” Darcy interrupted irritably. “After our forces were nearly wiped out, he didn’t surrender?”

“He had no right.” Tyr persisted. “It is not Asgard’s war. The tribes have not surrendered, so we cannot.”

Darcy snorted, “He didn’t even try to negotiate?”

Tyr shrugged, “Given the circumstances, Queen Freya saw it fit to establish neutral territory for which Asgardians to camp. This is one of the old bunkers, used during the Great War. It’s been maintained and used as a cellar. There’s a fair amount of mead and ale stored here. The jail cells have been kept and are currently being used to hold Bjarte. Freya welcomed us to drink the mead.”

“Under what charges is Bjarte currently being held?” Darcy asked numbly, planning to uphold the law so long as she had the chance. If she could get enough on Bjarte to prove that he was a traitor to Asgard, maybe she could get some peace.

Tyr didn’t answer immediately, “I’m not sure. Thor thought it best to lock him up for trying to kill you. He didn’t believe that you attacked him first.”

“So, attempted murder.” Darcy muttered, scrubbing her face. “Shit.”

“What?”
Darcy stared down at Loki’s face, desperately wishing he was awake to help her through this. “I did attack him first.”

Tyr made to question her, but Darcy interrupted, “Finish explaining our circumstances and I’ll tell you why I attacked him.”

Her friend cleared his throat, stepping beside her, “Odin banned communication between realms. I was allowed to come as a neutral party to deliver information to you and Thor specifically.”

“To me?” Darcy questioned, suspicious. “Odin is including me in his plans now? While I’m half dead and underground?”

Tyr chuckled good naturedly, quickly fixing his expression to that of someone much more serious than himself. “Well, actually, it was Frigga. She claims that it is essential that you find the traitor.”

Darcy kneaded her brow, trying to ignore how very dead Loki seemed. If it wasn’t for the gently rise and fall of his chest, she would have believed him gone. “Why wouldn’t Odin take Loki back to Asgard? Did he know his son was poisoned?”

“Yes.” Tyr answered, unsure. “Thor mentioned it in his letter…”

“Mentioned it?” Darcy queried further, trying to keep her anger under control. She was running low on energy. Rest would be a rare commodity these upcoming days, she needed to remain calm.

Tyr shook out his hands and Darcy felt bad for putting him under pressure. “He wrote that Loki had been shot by an arrow very similar, if not exactly the same as the one he was attack with in Skornheim. He says he doesn’t know who shot the arrow. He wrote that you had been seriously injured, but he gave no detail.”

“Fuck.” Darcy swore, tapping her chin out of old habit. “Who in Hel’s name is letting Thor run things?”

“I don’t know.” Tyr answered sullenly.

Working on breathing at a normal rate to keep the white spots out of her vision, Darcy thought over what needed to be done.

She had a deal with the Meiri that she would find the traitor. She had an obligation to Asgard to bring the traitor to justice. Loki would be the most help to her in this, but he was unconscious and poisoned with gods knows what. Based on what he was currently being treated with, she doubted that any of Asgard’s finest healers had survived the fight or even come along on the trip.

Then there was the matter of containing the antsy Asgardian troops.

Silence stretched on as Darcy began working out everything in her head, Tyr going to the other side of Loki to hold his hand.

At last, he spoke. “What say you?”

Darcy licked her dry, cracking lips in thought. “I need to find out what happened to Loki. The origin of the arrow that hurt him, the poison used…all of it. The same person that put this arrow in him is the same some that betrayed Asgard.”

“What makes you say that?” Tyr asked, moving away from Loki’s side.
“A hunch.” Darcy said, running a thumb over her prince’s frozen knuckles.

Tyr came to her side, a bag in hand, “Frigga sent me with this. She said it would help you.”

Darcy snatched the bag from him far too hastily, pleased at the number of papers and ink and candles she found inside. Frigga had her set up for working late.

She glanced around the room, squinting to make out the details. There were four torches, one on each wall. In the corner was a wooden table and a chair, both looking relatively creaky, but functional. Unsteadily, she made her way over to them, dropping the bag onto the table.

“We can’t arrest anyone until we have proof. Has all fighting ceased?” she inquired in a tone that suggested she for-sure knew what was happening. It was a falsehood. She was, in no way, the right person to lead the investigation.

“Yes.” Tyr informed her. “Sif returned later that evening with a woman who claimed she was a part of the Meiri. They took out a greater part of the tribal forces that threatened to attack as well as the nobles that joined in near the second fort.”

Darcy nodded, pursing her lips, “Did the Meiri say anything else?”

He made a face, petting Fenrir idly. “They asked to see you. The leader, she didn’t give us her name and she only spoke to Sif. It was a bit rude actually. She blatantly ignored everyone who wasn’t Sif or you. Anywho, she claimed you would live. She said you had a bargain to keep…?”

Setting out her papers on the desk, along with a few of the candles and bottles of ink, Darcy considered her deal with Micata. “The Meiri offered to help defend Asgardian troops and provide me transportation to Fort Stor where Loki and Thor were. In return, I would have to find Asgard’s traitor and they would get an hour with him before we went back to Asgard.”

Tyr stared at her blankly. “You cannot simply give the Meiri an Asgardian traitor.”

“I know!” Darcy insisted, her heart rate picking up, causing the cut on her arm to bleed heavier. She took deep, even breaths, trying to calm herself. “I know.” She repeated, “They can only keep him for a while and he has to be alive enough to speak for himself in trial. If anyone gives me shit for this, I’ll be sure to pay the consequences. But it’s the best I could do. Without the Meiri’s help, we would have lost a lot more men.”

Tyr helped her sit down and stacked the papers neatly on her new desk. “I wish that weren’t true.”

“You and me both.” She sighed, letting her gaze shift back to Loki. Her prince. She wasn’t much for revenge, but this was a special case. She would avenge him by bringing justice back into the game.

“Okay.” She finally said, holding out her hand, “We need to take care a few things first before I can look over these papers. Who’s currently in charge?”

Tyr assisted her in standing, helping her to walk to the door. “Thor, I believe.”

“Great.” Darcy said, “How many of the generals are still alive?”

“None. Hervingr is dead. All the captains…they’re slaughtered.”

He lead them out of the room with Loki back out into the hallway. To the right of his chamber, was a metal door with a lock that was thicker than the rest. Tyr opened it with no trouble and Darcy had
to shield her eyes from the burst of sunlight that suddenly met her face. The air was thick and a little humid, though still slightly cool with dew. It was morning. Late morning by the feel of it.

“Where is Thor?”

Tyr seemed to vacillate about what exactly to tell her as they climbed up a set of wooden stairs that led up from the bunker door to ground level. Men were scattered about in clumps. The forest had thinned out, leaving them to take cover under logs and make beds out of small ferns. Few acknowledged Darcy, bowing their heads to her only slightly.

“Tyr.” Darcy hurried him, needing answers straight away.

The poor man gave in at last, though his answer made Darcy want to rip up the Earth.

“He went to the nearest town.” Tyr spat out hurriedly.

“When?”

“Almost as soon as I arrived.”

“Who did he go with?”

“Fandrall. Hogun. Volstagg.”

“And not Sif?” Darcy clarified.

Tyr’s shoulders slumped, looking around the terrain. “No. She is resting.”


Tyr made a face. “Why?”

“No fucking idea.” Darcy growled, looking up at the trees. Vanaheim was really pretty. She should ask Loki to take her here sometime when a war isn’t happening. Because Loki was going to wake up. She would make sure of that.

“Tyr, listen.” Darcy said urgently, turning to him and lowering her voice. His big brown eyes stared back at her, open and trusting. “I have no power on Vanaheim. Technically, I don’t even have power on Asgard seeing as how Loki is unconscious. My only job is to project his beliefs and make sure that they get seen through accordingly.”

“I have an advisor, Darcy.” Tyr reminded her, “I know your profession.”

“Good.” Darcy affirmed, “Then you know how important it is that you convince Thor to temporarily appoint me as his advisor.”

“What.”

“Thank you.” Darcy said shortly, looking around the area. She couldn’t see any horses, perhaps they’d all been slain. “I’m going to go to the town Thor is at and bring him back here. In the meantime, gather up these men and tell them to go burn the dead.”

Tyr’s eyes widened to the size of serving platters. “Darcy, I don’t have that kind of authority. None of these men are of Thryheim. I could not tell them to wash their arses, let alone demand that they burn their comrades.”
Darcy’s sympathetic bone wept at Tyr’s heartbreak, but she willed herself to stay strong. She wasn’t about to start crying now. She had a job to do, god dammit. “I know, Tyr. Honey, I know. But, right now, we are the authority. And those dead bodies aren’t their comrades. They’re rat food. If we don’t burn the rat food, we’ll get vermin. A whole lot of fucking vermin.”

“Aye.” Tyr concurred solemnly. “During The Great War, on Jotunheim, we were forced to sleep in the ice caves. The ones of us that froze to death…they were eaten by white rats with eyes that practically glowed red in the dark.”

“Tell them to burn the bodies.” Darcy directed, deciding that she would either have to walk, or hope and pray that Hel would magically appear to help her to pick up Thor.

Tyr considered her proposal. “There is a large chance they won’t abide by my command.”

“Then wait for me to come back with Thor. If they don’t listen to their prince, they’re disobeying Asgardian law.” Darcy stated, turning towards to darker part of the woods and taking a steady breath. If this didn’t work, she was screwed. “Hel!”

The men surrounding her gave funny looks as she shouted into the forest. Tyr quirked an eyebrow as she waited for her horse to come to her aid.

Just when she thought Hel would never come, the soft whisper of her hooves came clomping around a patch of trees. She trotted to Darcy happily, nuzzling the young lady’s face. Frank and Fenrir joined in the greeting, seemingly overjoyed to see their friend.

“Good to see you, Hel.” Darcy told her horse adoringly. Tyr helped her up and Darcy bid him farewell. “Frank, Fenrir. Stay here. Guard Loki. Do not leave his side. If anyone who comes and goes that you don’t like, tell me.”

Both animals gave her dutiful looks before scurrying back into the bunker with purpose.

“I’ll be back soon.” Darcy promised, ignoring the fiery throb in her arm as Hel took off towards the town.

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It didn’t take Darcy very long to find Thor. All she had to do was go to the closest tavern in a village called Kitan and ask if anyone had seen the Prince of Asgard and three warriors. The tavern keep was very helpful after Darcy explained that she was there to escort his royal highness back to camp.

The tavern keep was a short plump woman named Gvaara with grey hair knotted in a loose bun atop her head. She spoke to Darcy in a hushed tone as her late morning patrons dined on plates of eggs and toast.

“They came in not too long ago, buying me clean out of ale and were rather demanding in ways I’d rather not say.” Gvaara told Darcy sternly.

Darcy shifted uncomfortably, mostly due to the pain in her arm. “I’m sorry. If you point me in the right direction, I can get them out of your hair.”

Gvaara gave Darcy a fierce look. “They’re upstairs. But listen here young lady, this town is a simple place. We grow enough for our people to get by. We don’t have the means to defend ourselves against Asgardian warriors.”
Darcy gave a serious look that was heightened by the strain it took to talk. Bjarte had probably done a number on her throat and she didn’t heal like an Asgardian. “The warriors will keep to themselves and I’ll have them steer clear of Kitan. The war is currently at a standstill, and ransacking an innocent community is below the standards of these men.”

Gvaara sneered at Darcy’s words, “You talk like you’ve never been to war. You say that now, but what about in a few weeks when your so called men get hungry or restless in their waiting? Hm? They come here, kill our sheep, cows…take our women. And what will you call that?”

Darcy tried to think of something to say, her hesitation giving Gvaara encouragement to speak more, leaning over the counter, her tired eyes trained on Darcy.

“Aye, I’ve seen war, little lady.” She said threateningly, “It’s not a pretty sight.”

Gritting her teeth, Darcy glared back. “I haven’t seen the hard times you have, but I’m going to do my best to prevent them. I swear that I will keep the men from your village. They’ll fend for themselves in the free land.”

Gvaara tilted her chin up at Darcy in an offensive gesture, “And I am supposed to trust the word of an Asgardian? Mine enemy?”

Darcy had no obligation to tell this woman anything, make her any promises. But Darcy empathized. She didn’t want Kitan to suffer because of some petty strife.

“If Kitan suffers any from Asgard’s presence, take it up with me.” Darcy directed, hoping to instill some assurance in the woman. “Hold me accountable and I will compensate Kitan.”

Gvaara narrowed her eyes, “And who might you be exactly?”

“Lady Darcy, Advisor to Prince Loki of Asgard.” She gave her full title with a sense of duty. Technically, she had no power in foreign affairs, but she did get paid for being Advisor. Most of the money she gave away, but she could save enough to reinstate Kitan if need be.

“A prince’s advisor.” Gvaara clarified skeptically, stroking her chin as if she had a beard. “And you would take responsibility?”

“Completely.” Darcy promised, wondering how much this was going to cost her later on. “I swear upon my family. I don’t want to take anything from you guys, alright? But we are low on medical supplies.”

Gvaara raised her dark brows, “Is this a bargain you try to make with me, Asgardian?”

“No.” Darcy said quietly, turning slightly so Gvaara could see her wound, “It’s a plea.”

The older woman wrinkled her nose at the injury and Darcy understood that it most certainly wasn’t smelling good. The cool, dank bunker had kept the infection at bay, but now she was suffering. She could only imagine the condition of some of the other men.

Gvaara sighed, jerking her head towards the bar behind her. “Come on. I’ll clean that for you and I’ll talk to Dekid. He runs the apothecary. He won’t have enough for your entire army, but he can teach you a thing or two about plants.”

Darcy nodded in thanks, standing up straighter. She desperately wanted to follow this woman and have the all of her aches and pains treated. But she couldn’t risk being found out as a mortal. As if Loki being unconscious wasn’t bad enough, she had idea how she was going to go on if…
She shook the thought from her mind, continuing her conversation with Gvaara. “That’s very kind of you. Though first, I would like to send Prince Thor back to his men. He is needed.”

The woman crossed her arms, gaze flicking to the ceiling momentarily. “He and the other blonde fellow went up there with a girl. It may be best if you wait.”

Darcy shook her head insistently, “I’m past the point of caring. The asshole asked for this.”

At that, Gvaara chuckled, crudely humored. “Very well, Milady. Up the stairs and first door on your right.”

Darcy thanked her, making her way through the tavern to the worn, wooden staircase that led up to the tavern’s second floor. The first door on her right wasn’t locked and she didn’t hesitate to pull the handle and let herself in.

Walking in on Thor wasn’t Darcy’s favorite hobby, but it was hardly the first time she’d seen him naked. During the spring and summer festivals, there were plenty of swimming in the lakes and ponds and water parks.

And there weren’t such things as swimsuits in Asgardian society. It was all or nothing out there. Men typically swam with other men and women swam by themselves or with other women.

Darcy had been totally unaware of this and had ridden Hel to the seaside where Thor had been off to swim. She needed his perspective on a certain issue she’d been working out with the late General Hervingr and Lord Solt.

Unfortunately for her, she’d gotten a little more perspective than she’d have liked.

Much of the same could be said for the current moment, for upon entering the tavern room, she was met with the mentally scarring sight of not only His Royal High-Ass, Prince Thor buttnekkid, but also Fandrall and a curvy girl with straight black hair and olive skin.

The three of them hurried to cover themselves with the bed sheets while Darcy averted her eyes, willing herself to stay strong. Gods, she wished Loki were here. He would’ve made the moment so much more gratifying.

“Darcy, what is the meaning of this!?” Thor bellowed and Darcy ignored him, searching the floor for discarded piles of clothing. Among the mess, she found a dress and picked it up. She held it out to the girl in the bed, making it clear that this was her dismissal.

“I’m terribly sorry about barging in like this.” Darcy apologized to her as she skittishly took the dress, her cheeks turning dark. She got out of the bed, dressing herself quickly, not saying a word to the mortal or two Asgardian men.

When at last the girl went to leave, Darcy touched her arm, finding that the woman was a great deal taller than herself. “Do you require pay?”

The girl shook her head once and quite vehemently, clearly displaying her offense. “I am not a whore.”

Darcy nodded apologetically, forgetting that prostitution wasn’t an acceptable profession in most regions of Vanaheim save the capital. “Were precautions taken against you getting pregnant?”

Under normal circumstances, Darcy wouldn’t have been so blunt. She hated herself for chastising the girl. But, right now, she was taking responsibility for what happened on Vanaheim. The
investigation of the killer was in her hands, Loki was dead, and everyone seemed a little clueless on what to do. If she could limit the damage done, even by a little bit, it would make all the difference.

The girl’s face fell slowly, her gaze flicking to Thor and Fandrall, then back to Darcy. Worry creased her brow and she ducked her head. “One is a prince…they said…he promised…”

Whatever they said, Darcy never found out, for the girl shot one glance back at Thor and Fandrall, humiliation plain on her face. She left without another word.

Everything about that moment made Darcy positively furious. She was outrageously angry and entirely justified.

She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply through her mouth and slowly exhaling. When she heard Fandrall start to move from the bed, she pointed to him accusingly. “Don’t move.”

He made a sound of disbelief in the back of his throat, “Darcy, come now. I truly do not see what all of the fuss is about. We only—”

“He’s unconscious and dying, just like most of your men will be in a week of conditions with hardly any shelter or food.” Darcy interrupted, mind buzzing as she vented her frustration. “And you, the both of you, are in a tavern, taking advantage of young women. Making promises to come back or to take her with you? That’s sick.”

Thor evidently had enough of having all of the facts given to him in full, for he picked up his trousers from the ground and pulled them on angrily. “Listen here, Darcy, I am a Prince of Asgard
“Then fucking act like one.” Darcy spat lividly, keeping her voice low to avoid startling the tavern’s occupants. “As I said, I’m not here to tell you want to do, I’m here to advise you.”

“You’re Loki’s advisor.” Thor pointed out, crossing his muscled arms. If Darcy wasn’t so close to ripping his head off, she might have admitted that he was kind of hot. His brother was hotter though, so there was that.

“I can’t advise an unconscious prince.” She said, her nerves settling. As she relaxed, she began to notice fresh blood seeping into her clothes. Clamping a hand over the wound, she addressed Thor and Fandrall in a more diplomatic tone, offering solutions to the problems at hand.

“Look, Thor, right now you are the only one of us on Vanaheim with any semblance of power. It’s time to take on all that responsibility you didn’t know you had.” She instructed, biting the inside of her cheek and holding back the pain. “Go back to camp, make me your advisor. Have the men burn the dead and group together all of the injured warriors. We’ll set up an infirmary in the bunker and try to nurse as many back to health as we can.”

Fandrall had begun to start dressing himself as well, traces of red in his cheeks at the embarrassment of Darcy’s tirade. “What of the traitor?”


Darcy squeezed her fists, “The investigation is up to me, as has been directed by Queen Frigga.” She bit her lip, turning away from them to hide the sense of helplessness she felt when it came to her prince. “I don’t know about Loki. I’ll do everything I can and more.”

“How many healers—?”

“None.” Darcy answered before Thor could finish asking. “We have no healers left alive.” She rubbed her eyes, truly feeling how exhausted she was. “Get back to camp, send me five men. I’ve made a deal with the tavern keep. She’s going to set us up with an apothecary. We’ll do the best we can for now.”

***

Baldur sat at his forge, polishing a new shield with long, deliberate strokes. Business had picked up again after the word about the happenings on Vanaheim had gotten out. Asgardians were preparing to defend themselves if the war evolved into something greater.

But for the first time in centuries, Baldur found himself…distracted.

His blonde apprentice had not been well in the past few days since Queen Frigga’s letter. She was finally working on setting up her forge, piecing it together bit by bit. Everything seemed normal at first glance, yet there was something very off about her.

Sigyn had lost weight, she was paler than usual, and every so often she would look off into the distance, horrified, as if overwhelmed with every ghastly, terrific thing that ever happened in the history of Yggdrasil.

That morning had been no different. Sigyn arrived on Prince Thor’s steed and descended into his forge in oversized clothes that didn’t seem to belong to her. She then set to work on whatever task he intended for her.
Baldur was appalled by his concern for his apprentice, but he could hardly help it. She reminded him far too much of—

His thoughts were interrupted by the dull smack of stone on stone.

He glanced up from his work to see Sigyn irritably hoisting the a clay brick she’d made herself, it’s edges crisp and well shaped. The quality of brick could make the difference between a forge, built for eternity, and a shitty one slapped together from pebbles and whatever some novice cunt found in their boots.

Sigyn’s work was fair enough and Baldur was proud, but that didn’t help the fact that she was in no state to keep working as she was.

“Sigyn.” He growled, twirling the sword in hand, checking it’s balance and shine before sheathing it in one smooth stroke.

“Baldur.” She responded in a tone that mocked his own as she restored the brick to its proper place.

He repressed a grin, favoring a sneer. “Disrespecting your master? And Frigga said she’d give me an apprentice worth a damn.”

Sigyn grunted, humored, as she heaved a bag of dried river sand into the pit she’d dug out for the base of her forge. Baldur found himself oddly endeared by her diligence. When he first met Sigyn, he wouldn’t have described her as cute. Beautiful, perhaps. Being the daughter of Lord and Lady of Jolena, he did not imagine that she could be anything more than every other apprentice he’d ever had.

But she was.

She wasn’t kind-hearted or sweet. In spite of her outward appearance, she was stubborn and all too similar to himself.

And like him, she oft engrossed her mind so deeply in her work to forget that there was a world and a body outside of the forge that required her attention. He should know, for only recently had he begun to emerge once again from the coals.

Hefting himself up from his stool, he set the sword down on the bench before taking the bag of sand from Sigyn’s small hands. “I think that’s enough for today. Go ahead back to the palace. You can pick this up again tomorrow. Go…eat some pastries or grow flowers…whatever the Hel ladies do now days.”

Sigyn smirked, taking back the bag of sand. “You go back to eating rocks and yelling at walls. Or have the habits of old, reclusive men changed without my knowledge?”

He eased the bag of sand away from her, dropping it with a muted thud, drawing an aggravated expression on Sigyn’s face. “Why?”

Scratching his beard, he tried with all his might to think of an explanation that didn’t involve him blatantly saying he was concerned for her health. He wasn’t. Not really. He simply…she was his apprentice. Her work reflected him. Quite.

“You look like someone beat you with a bundle of Jotun shit.” He explained plainly, pleased with his diversion.
Sigyn looked only mildly disgusted at the thought. “Your imagination must be so very colorful to paint such interesting pictures in conversation.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” He said, taking her jab with every ounce of grace of which she took his. “Now get.”

Her brows came together in confusion, “You are serious? Have I performed my tasks poorly? If so I shall amend them.”

The blacksmith shook his head, turning from her to kneel by the lake to wash the soot from his hands in the crystal water. “No. You’ve done fine.”

“Then why--?”

“Because.” Baldur told her gruffly, struggling to come up with a reason for her dismissal. “You deserve a break. Go back to the palace. Enjoy time with your little friends. Just…don’t do that anymore.” He ordered, gesturing widely to her forge.

She took a step back, hurt flickering across her noble features before hardening into an all too familiar disdain. “No.”

He stood, shaking the water off his hands, grumbling cantankerously to himself. “Damn, useless apprentice doesn’t do what I fucking ask…”

“I have work to do.” Sigyn stated in a hard voice, turning back to her work, picking up a hammer and striking one of the larger bricks that was only slightly uneven. “Warriors are dying on Vanaheim. I would not do well by their sacrifice to be idle, tasting cakes and dallying with a needle and thread.”

The stone split, but before she could bring her hammer down upon it again with more force than even her betrothed could conjure, Baldur grabbed the blunt end of the hammer in hand, preventing the action. “Sigyn.”

“Are you not typically goading me to hit harder?” she snapped, making a futile attempt to yank the tool from his grasp.

He let her take it at last, coming to the conclusion that she must be worried about her friends at war. She was courting the second prince for quite some time, though Baldur doubted she had any care for him. It was more likely that she was fretful over her betrothed, Prince Thor.

“Look,” Baldur sighed as she broke the brick again and again, reducing it to rubble. “Your prince is fine. He’s probably waving his hammer harder than you are now.”

Sigyn tossed aside the tool with an angry snarl, reminding Baldur of a time long ago when he would have been shocked to hear a woman make such a sound. “He. Is. Not. My Prince.”

“Yes he is.” Baldur said back, waving a dismissive hand. “Whether you like it or not, he’s yours. Odin made sure of that.”

Positively livid, Sigyn kicked the gravel, scattering it across the ground as she clenched her hands into fists. “He is not! I will have myself hanged before I wed that beast of a man! And if I cannot die and if I cannot escape, then I shall kill Odin and have an eternity in the dungeons!”

Baldur had half a mind to tell her to calm down. But in his experience, that was a suggestion that went rather poorly. Instead, he crossed his arms, intrigued at the thought of this tiny lady besting
the Allfather. “I forget you young people are so dramatic. I was just as terrible.”

The lady laughed humorlessly, her cracking, tired voice echoing around the cave. “You presume much about me if you think I exaggerate my dispassion for my current circumstances.”

“Probably,” Baldur admitted, picking up her hammer and restoring it to its proper place on the wall with the rest of his tools. “As far as arranged marriage goes, you could do worse. He’s got a decent family, and you’d be Queen.”

“I am already aware that power suits me ill.” She countered, “Though his family is far superior to my own, I have no interest in being a part of it.”

Baldur felt, in that moment, as though he was speaking with a younger version of himself. Convincing her of anything was a lost cause. He thought it best to simply listen. He wondered how many had heard her tirade on Prince Thor. He imagined very few knew of her distaste for the role as Queen of Asgard.

Taking several deep breaths, Sigyn unclenched her fists, turning to face the lake. “He could die in that war and I would shed tears for those who loved him as I could not.”

Baldur thought that was fair enough. He wasn’t about to cry for Prince Thor either. He sat back down on his stool, giving up in his endeavor to make Sigyn return to the palace. At least she was taking a break from her work.

“If you have no care for your future husband…” he began, pausing to chortle at her sneer, the soot on her face accentuating the expression. “…then why stress as you are over the war?”

“Because…” Sigyn muttered, her shoulders quaking with pent up frustration.

Baldur had forgotten how emotional adolescents were. He wondered how he’d survived that age, it seemed awful. They were far too unstable to be trying to marry them off. Baldur couldn’t imagine Sigyn as Queen of Asgard without also including lots of fire and chaos in the vision.

“Because why?” he insisted, figuring that she had friends fighting. Or perhaps a brother.

“You wouldn’t understand.” She sighed, slumping against the wall.

Her dismissal made Baldur pull a look of disbelief. Nevertheless, he conceded. “Probably. We blacksmiths aren’t renowned for our deepest understandings of adolescent crisis.”

The back of her blonde head, hit the cave wall as she closed her eyes in distress. “Oh gods…”

“I doubt they could help you now. Clearly you are experiencing something none have ever felt before.”

“You are most unhelpful.”

“Come now, Sigyn—“

“You would not understand!”

“Try me.” He argued, leaning forwards on his elbows as she pushed herself off the wall, resuming her frantic pacing across the floor. “What? You got—?”

“No.”
“You—?”

“No!”

“Then what—?”

“My lady!” Sigyn shouted. There was a bare second where she froze, eyes widening in complete mortification at the words that had escaped her mouth.

Baldur sat back on his stool, watching her reaction with interest.

“Your lady?”

She shook her head, just barely, remaining silent.

“Huh.” He cleared his throat, thinking that perhaps he knew more about what Sigyn was going through than he’d originally thought. “You have a lady at war?”

She closed her eyes, sighing heavily, admitting defeat. “Master Baldur…please, do not speak of this to anyone. I beg of you.”

He ignored her plea, standing up from his stool, crossing the floor to put his large hands on her shoulders. “Do you love her?”

Bewilderment swept across her features, turning her aggression into something softer. “What?”

“Your lady,” Baldur said again gruffly, “Do you love her?”

Ever so slowly she nodded, her eyes stuck to the floor. “I do.”

“Good. If she’s fighting a war, she needs you to love her.” Baldur smiled, clapping her on the shoulder, “Come, there’s something I’d like to show you.”

The astonishment on her face was enough to make him chuckle again as he lead her away from the forge and towards the back chambers of his underground home. They took the same hallway that led to his treasure room, only they stopped sooner at two large wooden double doors that diverged into his bedchamber and study.

He lived cozily enough. They stepped inside and he waved a hand, casting a spell to light the torches in the chamber. His bed was pushed against the wall while his desk was cluttered with papers and new designs for efficient weaponry.

“Pardon the mess.” He said, referring to the state of his floor which was a disorderly mess of metal samples and discarded papers.

He went to the far wall, approaching the two ornate doors that opened to his closet. Taking a deep breath, Baldur readied himself for the pang of loneliness whenever he gazed upon its contents. But Sigyn needed to see.

He pulled open the doors, revealing two sets of armor sported by faceless figurines. The first set was his, golden and embellished with a classic Asgardian brand. His helm was cast with the horns of a boar for strength and power.

But what he wished for Sigyn to see was the smaller, more feminine second set of armor. This set was golden as well, shaped elegantly with silver curls and a style similar to his own. The helm had, protruding from the head, the horns of a bilgesnipe for fierceness and protectiveness.
He cleared his throat, smirking at how very well matched the helm had been to its owner. “Nanna.” He said to Sigyn, saying the name of his late wife for the first time in centuries. “She was a true warrior. Irritating little shit, she was. She was always going on about honor and doing what she must for her realm…it got frustrating as Hel.” He reached out to run his thumb over the smoothly polished side of her helm. “But I loved her anyways. I couldn’t help it. She made me love her.”

Sigyn chuckled softly, “Sounds familiar.”

He nodded, remembering she who he’d loved and lost without so much as a goodbye. “She was so strong. Stronger than me. I couldn’t fight in a war. My place has always been at the forge. But Nanna…she was born to fight. You could tell just by looking at her. Dark hair, dark eyes…she didn’t take anyone’s shit.”

His mouthy apprentice gave him a sideways look, “And how is that if she married you?”

Barking a laugh, Baldur gave her shoulder a good-natured shake. “Damn right! Proudest moment of my life.”

He sighed, imaging her face within the helm he’d spent hours perfecting, ensuring that she would not be hurt. It left a bitter taste in his mouth at how he’d failed her. “I was a lot like you. Upper class, son of a Lord and Lady, betrothed to a blonde broad with enough brains to hold a title. Thankfully, I had an older brother, thankfully he had more interest in my future wife than I. They went ahead, got married, and I was free to do what I wanted.”

Sigyn snorted, “And that was becoming a blacksmith?”

“Not at first.” He said with a sigh, “I didn’t know what I wanted. I ran away from my family, traveled Asgard, sailing the seas alone on my father’s ship. Eventually, I ended up on the other side of the realm from where I started, clean out of supplies and nowhere to go. A blacksmith took me in, taught me his trade and I took a liking to it.”

“Was he skilled?”

Baldur chuckled to himself, admiring the armor once again. “No. He was a shit smith and a drunk. But he was a good man. He died and left me all he had. It wasn’t much, just a few tools and a bit of gold. It was enough for me to get by. I moved around a bit, working as a smith. I got pretty damn good at it after a while. Good enough, I believed, to move to a bigger city.”

Sigyn remained silent, waiting for him to continue. Baldur was softened by her attention and he scowled at the feeling. “I set up shop in the capital of Gymirsgard, making a living forging swords, armor, tools and appliances for the people there. Occasionally, a lord might stop by having heard of my work. Life was fair, simple, and I lived happily.”

He smiled contentedly at the memory, “Then she came along.”

“Nanna?” His apprentice queried and Baldur watched her gaze fall onto his wife’s armor.

“Nanna.” He repeated with a sigh, “Now there was someone I wasn’t expecting. Gods, you should’ve seen her. She was beautiful. Came into my shop one day, absolutely wild. She wanted to know how much I charged for armor.

“She was a farmer, or her parents were at least. Money was scarce and she intended to work for the money to pay for her armor in full.” Baldur explained, stroking his beard at the memory. “She would have done it to, had I not been such a brainless fool.”
“What did you tell her?” Sigyn asked teasingly.

He scoffed, “I didn’t tell her anything! At least not at first. I couldn’t speak for the life of me. I wrote down how much her request would cost. She paid the initial sum and left without another word.

“I was a young man at the time. I’d spent the last few centuries alone working in a forge or sailing. I had no idea how to talk to this woman.” He told his apprentice, causing her to giggle. It was an unlikely sound for Sigyn, but he figured if anything was worthy of a giggle, it was his incompetence when it came to women.

“I was clueless.” He said with a grin, “I asked everyone who came in about the girl with dark hair and a will strong enough to kill a man where he stood. And, of course, they all knew. Her name was Nanna. She worked with her parents on their farm just outside the city. She sometimes brawled for money and could beat the shit out of anyone who dared to do her family wrong.

“In those days, farmers were taken advantage of if they didn’t stick up for themselves. From what I heard, her parents were too soft. They’d let people steal from them for no reason other than they didn’t wish to fight.”

Baldur folded his hands thoughtfully, “I as good as slaved over that armor. I just kept thinking that this woman ought to have all the protection I could give her. When she came by my shop again to see my progress, I offered the armor to her free of charge.”

Sigyn looked up at him curiously, “Did she accept it?”

“No.” Baldur said cheerfully, “She knocked me on my ass!”

He burst into a fit of full, wholehearted hysterias and Sigyn joined in as well. “Truly?”

“Truly.” The blacksmith sighed, relishing the memory. “Course, I didn’t laugh at the time. You can imagine my surprise. I was a Lord’s son. I was raised thinking that to court women, one must offer gifts and presents to gain her affection.”

“Did she forgive you?” Sigyn asked.

“Well,” Baldur began, thinking back over the events of that afternoon. “Eventually she did. I had a Hel of a time trying to court her. I tried to keep it secret that I fancied her. Course, everyone in the damn city knew it, including her. I was an idiot. I kept making her things. Armor, a shield, a new plow for her field… it went on. After a while she decided to give me a chance.”

His apprentice smiled politely, “You courted her then?”

“Courting is one word for it.” Baldur said gruffly, staring off into the distance with a satisfied smirk, “Probably not the kind that would be accepted at the palace, but gods it was excellent.”

Covering her mouth with her hand, Sigyn looked away, feigning illness. “Baldur, as my good friend Darcy says, that was far too much information.”

Chuckling, he clapped her on the back, “Ah, but we were in love. We married and moved here to the capital. Bor took a personal liking to my work and I soon became the best blacksmith on Asgard. Nanna joined the ranks of Einherjar and we lived happily.”

Baldur reminisced on the many years he and his wife had, making friends, living their lives, being happy… His smile slowly disappeared into something grimmer. “It didn’t last. The Dark Elves and
that lousy bastard Malekith came along with a war. Nanna believed it was her duty to defend Asgard. And me. That’s what she did, see? She protected what she cared about. She had hard edges, but she was so kind…”

Sigyn was silent as she listened, offering her presence as support.

“She died in battle,” Baldur said thickly, “She took it upon herself to face the Kursed. Great, wretched beasts, made from magic none should ever bear. They brought me back her armor and her hammer.

“I could hardly believe it. Nanna. Dead? Never. She always came back to me. Every time she left, she came back.” He rubbed his brow with his callused fingers. “I never met anyone who meant as much to me as she did. Friends have come and gone, any family I had is dead or forgotten. She loved me. Only the gods know why, but she did. Every time she went out to fight, do you know what she’d tell me?”

At this, Baldur returned to the present as he turned to face his apprentice. He got down on his knees, grasping her shoulders and giving them a slight shake, making sure her steady blue eyes were set on him. “She told me that she’d always come back for me. And that’s how I knew she was safe. Because as long as Nanna had me to protect, as long as she had me to come home to, she would do the impossible to get back.”

Sigyn stared at him with a confused mix of worry and sympathy. “But she died. She didn’t come back. Is this supposed to make me feel better or worse that my lady is at war and has no set date to return?”

Baldur made a face, clearly seeing the error in his storytelling. He shook his head, releasing one of her shoulders to point at Nanna’s armor. “You’re missing the point.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.” Baldur assured, receiving a heavy-hearted sigh in return.

“Listen,” he encouraged, offhandedly wondering why he felt so obligated to set his apprentice’s mind at rest. “Do you love her?”

“We’ve been through this.” Sigyn reminded him sassily, though she conceded nonetheless. “Yes. I do.”

Baldur raised his brows in hopefulness. “Great, does she love you?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t worry about her.” Baldur said calmly, “You can bet your ass that she’s probably in Vanaheim right now, thinking of you. She will fight whatever it is that’s keeping them there and come back to you.”

“And if she dies?” Sigyn challenged, gaze flicking momentarily to Nanna’s armor.

Baldur squeezed her hand, “Then she’ll die having loved you more than anything. But she won’t die. Not now.”

Sigyn made a face, “How could you possibly know that?”

Shaking his head, Baldur got to his feet, “No idea. You two have a life to live yet. Maybe get
married, have kids…?”

She made a face at the mention of children and Baldur barked a laugh. “Yeah, I felt the same way about kids when I was your age. Now I regret not having any when Nanna asked. Don’t rush into it.”

“I don’t intend to.” Sigyn reassured, taking a final look at Nanna’s armor.

Baldur watched how her eyes swept over the finish, making out the scratches that he hadn’t wanted to buff out. Finally, he sighed, bumping her arm with his hand. “Let’s go, little lady.”

Sigyn followed him as he turned to leave, her gait considerably more relaxed. “Where?”

“Food. Drink. A walk.” Baldur clarified as they left his chambers, heading toward the ladder that lead back to the shop. “You look like the ravens picked your bones overnight.”

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Darcy was having one hell of a time with the war.

As it turned out, no one knew what the fuck was going on. Not a damn soul. Everything Tyr told her was the extent of what anyone knew for sure.

It had been three days of almost nothing.

First, it was imperative that they establish territory and set the means for basic hygiene. She had been through far too many war journals were men died from drinking contaminated water or living in their own shit for extended periods of time. They had enough space and every warrior was trained to bury their shit.

Tyr was witness to Thor establishing Darcy as his wartime advisor. Technically, it didn’t do much for her as far as telling people what to do, but it gave her official, legal qualifications for questioning Bjarte and any other possible people she suspected in the investigation.

The apothecary in Kitan had supplied her with enough knowledge to pass it on to a designated group of warriors who had basic, very simple healing training. They gathered supplies from the surrounding area to patch up the wounded men.

Fortunately no one was too badly injured.

Sadly, that’s because most who got injured died from poisoned weapons during battle.

The first day had been spent burning bodies in the summer heat. It wasn’t fun. She had been among the ranks of warriors, searching out their comrades in the forest, stripping them of their armor and collecting their tokens, if any, to return to their families.

As much as she didn’t want to do it, burning them was a necessary action. In the middle of a muggy summer on a foreign realm, dead bodies lead to illness that their few remaining numbers wouldn’t be able to handle.

Thankfully, it hadn’t taken any longer than a day to get the grueling job done.

Food was going to become another problem that Darcy wasn’t well enough equipped to deal with.

The free land was well populated with deer and elk and other edible creatures for men to hunt and kill. However, she didn’t know how long said population of forest critters could support the
number of people that had to be fed. Everything was being rationed accordingly.

A nearby stream provided water and there were a few old pots inside the bunker that worked well enough for cooking and boiling the water for sanitation.

Thor had assigned Tyr to do the greater part of managing the men, which was probably one of the wisest decisions Thor had made thus far on Vanaheim.

Tyr was an extremely sympathetic person and a good judge of character. Seeing him work with the warriors to assign them positions they would excel at and encouraging them to do so even in this time of confusion, reminded Darcy of why Thryheim was so successful as a province. Tyr might have been passionate and fun-loving, but they were the qualities that made him such a great leader.

Darcy felt lucky to have him with her.

The real challenge was finding the traitor.

She had not a single doubt in her mind that Asgard’s betrayer was High Lord Bjarte. He was still locked in a cell in the bunker for attempted murder.

Darcy wanted to make accusations. She wanted to pin point Bjarte, call him the traitor, wrap him up in his intestines and give him to the Meiri as a plaything for their pet beasts.

But she didn’t have evidence.

There wasn’t a single shred of proof on Vanaheim that could incriminate Lord Bjarte. She didn’t even have a witness.

That left her to start from the only lead she had.

Loki.

Pain was preferably to the numbness she felt while at his side. He wasn’t dead, he wasn’t alive. Over the past few days there had been absolutely no change in his state. His heart still beat, he breathed.

Darcy didn’t have the magic, nor the materials to identify what was wrong with him. The papers she’d gotten from Baldur were somewhat helpful in the sense that she could now more fully identify the golden arrow which sat on her desk in Loki’s dead room.

Most of the men had taken to calling the chamber in which she mainly resided the General’s Study. It was a common thing in war for the general or the king or whoever’s in charge to have a room set aside as their study where they can contemplate their next action.

It was funny, in her opinion, how these men could consider her on the same level as a general. She hated the job. She especially hated the fact that her ‘study’ was the same room where her unconscious best friend/life partner was laying half dead.

Even so, she spent most of her time there.

In fact, that’s where she was at the present moment, sitting in her chair, candle lit, watching Loki’s sleeping face from afar as she considered the weapon that put him in that state.

‘Valkyrie Hide’ is what Baldur called it. The substance that could poison any Asgardian and could only be remedied by healing waters.
Well, last Darcy checked, Loki hadn’t been near any healing waters and he wasn’t dead. He’d probably managed to heal himself to some extent with magic. That was possible, wasn’t it? Loki knew his way around magic. It was second nature to him. He wouldn’t even have to know what exactly was going on to provide some kind of solution to the problem.

She knitted her brow as the candlelight flickered.

Why would anyone, Bjarte included, want Loki dead? Because he was a royal? Because he was a pain in the ass?

And for what reason would half of Asgard’s army need to be slaughtered just for the assassination of one prince?

Scrubbing her face with her hands, Darcy thought over her questions, bringing up a solution she’d been bouncing around in her head since yesterday.

Despite having treated herself to some of the apothecary’s antibiotics, Darcy was weaker than ever. The cut on her arm was no closer to healing than it was a few days ago and with barely any rest and limited nutrition, the lingering effects of Bjarte’s strength on her person had her beat. Her mind was working slowly, crawling through her thoughts at a dangerously slow pace.

But she’d been saving up her energy for a while now. After studying through all that Tyr had brought her and writing several notes about the current situation, she was ready to proceed.

Tiredly getting to her feet, Darcy called Frank from where he lay beside Loki, his tail sadly drooping off the end of the table. “C’mere you.”

The serpent slithered to her side, winding up her body and giving her chin an affectionate lick. She kissed the top of his head, more than glad for the company of him and Fenrir. Without those two, she was as good as dead.

“Hey, do me a favor and go grab Sif and Thor. I need to talk to them about some important stuff.” She implored her pet. He abided by her request, setting out through a crack in the door, leaving her alone with a dozing Fenrir and a vegetable Loki.

Heavily, she shuffled to his side, leaning against the edge of the table where her friend lay. Exhaling deeply, she took his hand, “It’s a mad world out there, Lokes.”

Unsurprisingly, he didn’t respond and she looked down at their hands, gripping his fingers, desperately wishing with all her might that he would squeeze hers back.

“You’re not allowed to worry about me anymore.” She demanded, poking his pale arm. “After all this is over, I’m going to lock you in a cell and you won’t be able to leave.”

Nothing.

She slumped against the table in defeat, letting that numb, empty oasis consume her insides for a moment. She put herself in Loki’s body, letting her tired soul sleep for just a few seconds before--

“Darcy.”

Thor’s booming voice shook Darcy from her peace and back into the real world. He and Sif stood in the door, both of them looking a little worse for wear, but mostly fine.

She faced him with a kind of professional attitude that she usually upheld during her meetings with
Lord Solt. Firm, stern, and quick to the point.

“I suspect Bjarte is the traitor.” Darcy muttered, pushing her hair back. It had been three days since she’d seen shampoo or conditioner. She could bathe in the stream to get some of the dirt off her body, but her hair was honestly suffering.

“We believe him to be as well.” Sif said, gaze flicking to the corridor behind them where Bjarte resided.

Thor crossed his arms in irritation, “If you suspect him, why are we still here?”

Darcy grit her teeth, glaring at him with all the energy she could spare to be angry. “I have no proof that he did anything. We have two accounts of betrayal here: first, the attempted assassination of a prince and secondly, the war crime of the rebellion of the tribal leaders.”

Sif’s brows came together, “Are they connected?”

Darcy shrugged helplessly, returning to her desk. “I don’t know. I think they are, but I have no fucking idea how. I need to talk to the tribal leaders. If any of them are left. Figure out where I can find any or all of them. Questions need to be asked.”

Sif nodded dutifully and Thor, his ever self-righteous self, held up a hand of protest. “Have you spoken with Bjarte yet?”

“No.” Darcy told him shortly, crossing her arms and wondering how badly she was hurt. Something was broken in her body. A rib maybe. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Thor scoffed, blonde brows coming together in frustration. “As you have said to me, Darcy, we are at war. You suspect him as a criminal and you have not yet spoken to him about the crimes you believe him to have committed? My brother is—“

“Don’t get me started on your brother, Thor.” Darcy spat, reaching for the back of her chair and leaning heavily on it. “I have not talked to Bjarte because I don’t have anything to ask him yet other than ‘did you do it?’ And, honestly, it hasn’t been that long since the bastard tried to choke the life out of me.”

Her response was met with silence as she settled back down in her chair, “Get me tribal leaders and—“

The loud clunking sound of someone hurrying down the stairs, followed by a quick knock on the door interrupted Darcy’s demands.

“Enter.” She and Thor said in unison.

Tyr burst in the door, a look of worry plastered on his youthful face. It darkened at Sif’s presence, though he did not acknowledge her. Technically, they weren’t allowed to see one another, but given the circumstances, they were being rather lax with Sif’s abandonment and the rules pertaining to her familial exile.

“Darcy,” Tyr addressed her ecstatically and Darcy sincerely wondered where in Hel he’d gotten his energy from. It troubled her that his excitement was not of elation, but rather anxiety. “Come quickly, we have an unexpected visitor.”

Immediately Darcy straightened up, her heart racing like someone had pumped her blood full of caffeine. “Who?”
Tyr’s gaze flicked from her to Thor, brows furrowed in a seriousness that reminded Darcy once again of why he was so successful at leading a realm. “He claims to be a messenger of one of the tribes. The men have him surrounded.”

Without hesitation, Darcy exited the chamber, hustling as quickly as she could out of the bunker to the heart of the Asgardian camp.

They managed to recover several tents from the backs of the dead both Aesir and Vanir. Over the past few days, men had organized themselves with Tyr’s help to have assigned quadrants. Dead leaves and sticks had been cleared away to make room for a number of short brown and green tents. Nestled between the trees and living spaces were fires, many of which were roasting Vanahem’s native beasts and morels.

While the air was thick with the musty aroma of men and meat, what weighed most heavily on the camp was tension. Darcy imagined she could scoop the uneasy feelings out of the air like they were melty chocolate ice cream. Only, something told her the war-tensions didn’t taste like delicious chocolate ice cream. If war were an ice cream flavor, it’d be poop with extra adrenaline.

Most of the men weren’t at their tents, and Darcy sensed a bout of commotion near the river.

She and Thor followed Tyr through the camp to wear a hoard of Asgardian warriors were rounded, shouting and bashing one another in a huge, sweaty mass. Many of them were only half dressed, shoes removed or only pieces of their armor hurriedly shoved on. All of them held weapons, spears, hammers, and swords pointed towards the river’s shore in threat.

Tyr, who happened to be fully clothed in his shimmering golden armor, began roughly pushing the men back, shouting at them to cease their assault.

“Back, all of you!” He demanded, gesturing for Darcy to step forward.

At the approach of her and Thor, the men separated, hoisting their weapons and grumbling in disgruntled undertones. Darcy nodded to them and they stepped away from the river, revealing a short, shirtless boy squatting in the mud. In his hands he held the reigns of a modest sized brown mare that stood agitated in the water.

The boy fell to his knees at the sight of Thor and Darcy.

“Princes of Asgard, I come with message!” he bowed his head, clawing at the dirt. It took Darcy a second to realize that he was legit groveling at Thor’s feet.

She waited in revulsion for Thor to call off this horrific display of submission. Surely he must think this was some crude and pathetic action that should be stopped at once.

Only, Thor didn’t say a word about the boy’s state. Instead, he lifted his chin, glaring down at the poor guy. “What message do you bring?”

“An apology, Highness.” His answer sounded like a plea, “From Gohun. Please…”

Thor leered over the boy and Darcy figured he must be putting on a show for his men. Though Thor’s behavior irked something deep inside her, the name Gohun sparked something in her mind.

“Who is this Gohun?” Thor demanded of the boy.

Just then, Darcy remembered exactly who Gohun was. Gohun, Chief Leader of the Free Land, Elder of the Takara clan. The Cheiftans of the Free Land were a council of chiefs from every clan,
save the Meiri, that met for the sake of Vanaheim’s tribal arrangements. There were twelve in total and Darcy vaguely remembered seeing all of them at the beginning of the battle a few days prior.

Darcy was about to answer Thor when he seemingly became impatient with the time it was taking the boy to answer his question. He retaliated and responded to his own impatience by settling Mjolnir’s blunt edge on the youngling’s shoulder threateningly.

Infuriated by Thor’s aloof belittlement of the innocent, she made the decision to take over the questioning of the boy from there on out.

Before Thor could speak again, Darcy looked to the boy again, prompting her own questions and offering the boy her hand to help him stand. “What is it that Elder Chief Gohun has to tell us?”

Ever so slowly the boy studied her hand as if it were some kind of trick. At last he took it, replying to her question hesitantly as she pulled him up.

“He wishes for the Princes to visit him at his home in Takara.”

This wrought silence among the crowd, eyes going to Thor for a decision. Darcy narrowed her eyes, thinking through this offer.

On one hand, the chiefs could be playing them like a game of Hnefatafl. They already betrayed Asgard, what would keep them from doing it again, this time taking out the one remaining Aesir prince?

But Darcy suspected that the tribes didn’t have much to do with the betrayal. She would put her money on Bjarte in a heartbeat, but that didn’t mean she had proof against the tribes. They could very well want to kill Thor and ravage the rest of the Asgardian forces. Still, they must know that if they wanted Thor dead, they would be asking for war with Asgard.

Coming to a decision, Darcy tapped Thor on his exposed bicep. “Can we talk for a moment?”

He nodded curtly allowing Darcy to pull him off to the side, close to the river where it would be harder to make out their words. Disgruntled, the eldest prince crossed his arms. “It could very well be a trap.”

“I know.” Darcy sighed, kneading her brow. “But I don’t think it is.”

Thor gave her a confused look, “Why?”

She shrugged, looking over Thor’s beefy shoulder to the messenger boy. He was quite young, though clothed well for someone from the Takaran clan. His trousers were leather and his shirt was embellished with colorful stones. His hair was braided back, the dark locks intentionally entwined with leaves of dry grass.

“I think the tribes were played.” Darcy said. When Thor didn’t recognize her terminology, she rephrased, “They were tricked as we were. The tribes have no reason to make Asgard their enemy. They don’t strike me as the kind of people to have a deathwish. They’re probably feeling really threatened right now.”

“You are suggesting we go with him?” Thor clarified, aghast.

Darcy nodded. “Yeah. I think we should.”

“The boy could be lying.”
Squeezing her eyes shut, Darcy went back to the boy. She tried to sound less intimidating. The poor kid was standing in a circle of pissed warriors, all with their weapons ready to poke him.

“Men,” Darcy called, raising her hand just slightly, “Go back to your tents.”

They hesitated, many shuffled in place, refusing to move.

Darcy made a face. “Now!” she barked.

In an instant, they gathered up their things and retreated to their tents leaving Tyr, Sif, Fandrall, Volstagg, Hogun and Thor waiting around. She didn’t pay them any mind, choosing to give the boy her full attention. He seemed considerably less frightened, though his eyes kept flitting nervously to Mjolnir. He couldn’t have been any older than nine in Midgardian years.

Sighing, she crouched in front of the kid, making sure he met her gaze. “My name is Darcy. I’m Prince Loki’s Advisor. Are you familiar with how Asgardian politics work?”

The boy shook his head, hooked on Darcy’s words.

“I’ll tell you then,” she said, holding up her hand so the boy could plainly see all five of her fingers. “There are five main things an Advisor does. Firstly, they give advice to their royal counterpart when they need it. Usually, Loki ignores my advice and he gets himself in a world of shit and I end up having to find a way to get him out of it.”

The advisor also manages their royal’s letters and papers, keeps them in the public’s favor, and stands in for them at meetings.” Darcy smiled, pulling down four of her fingers so only her pointer remained, “But the last thing is the most important. Can you guess what it is?”

The boy giggled, perhaps involuntarily as he nervously glanced around at the people surrounding their little conversation. But Darcy called his attention back to her with the rest of her speech.

“The advisor also manages their royal’s letters and papers, keeps them in the public’s favor, and stands in for them at meetings.” Darcy smiled, pulling down four of her fingers so only her pointer remained, “But the last thing is the most important. Can you guess what it is?”

The boy shook his head again, eyes wide, completely focused on what she had to say.

“I have to protect him.” She finished letting down her hand. “He was hurt during battle and I was unable to help him. He lives and I must find his killer and bring them to justice.”

The boy looked her up and down, confused. “But you are small.”

Darcy smirked, poking him lightly on his chest. “Hey, you’re small too, bucko.”

He frowned, “My name is not ‘bucko’. It is Bal.”

“Bal…” Darcy repeated his name thoughtfully, “Do you think being small means I can’t protect my prince?”

Seemingly embarrassed, Bal shrugged, looking at his feet. “I don’t know.”

“Size doesn’t matter.” Darcy explained, picking a smallish stone from the earth. “If I were to throw this rock at Thor’s head fast enough, it would still dent his thick skull.”

Bal laughed and there were several chuckles behind her, Thor’s not included.

“But I need to be sure, Bal, that Gohun has no desire to hurt me or Prince Thor.” She said firmly, “I have to be alive to protect Loki, as does Thor. We would relish in having the opportunity to speak with Gohun, but we have no idea if we can trust him and your people not to slay us where we stand as they did during battle.”
Bal let his shoulders slump, “Gohun say this is no trick.”

Darcy was going to argue that Gohun’s word wasn’t much to go by at this point when Bal began to take his shirt off. Everyone gave him a strange look, save Darcy and Hogun.

Bal’s chest was marked with a dark blue tattoo that stretched across his sternum.

The Takaran were almost as obsessed with their heritage as the Aesir and the Jotunar. Each family had their own symbol of sorts, like a crest. But instead of embellishing the insignia on pocket watches and shields, they tattooed them onto their skin as children. Frigga had made her memorize all of the memorable chieftain’s symbols, claiming it might be useful one day.

Bal bore the sign of Gohun.

“Shit.” Darcy swore, standing up and scrubbing her face with her hand. “You’re Gohun’s son?”

“Yes.” Bal said, hastily putting his shirt back on. “Darcy…Milady…?”

She gave him a small, tired smile. “You can call me Darcy.”

“Darcy,” Bal continued urgently, “My father say you will be safe.”

She nodded, tapping her chin as she slowly paced, her armor beginning to feel heavy on her shoulders and her arm ached, longing for the coolness of the bunker. “Bal?” she addressed the child, “Does your horse have a name?”

Fondly, Bal reached behind him to stroke his mare, “She is Matella, after the stars.” He said, petting an area of white splotches on her fur that resembled the leaf-like constellation, Matella, in the Vanir sky.

Darcy folded her hands, channeling her inner Frigga. “She is beautiful. My friend Sif knows an excellent spot of grass where she can graze and restore her energy for your journey home.

Bal’s eyes widened in fear as Sif stepped forwards, his eyes roaming over the large sword sheathed at her hip. Now that Darcy thought about it, offering up Sif wasn’t the best idea. She wasn’t great with kids.

“Volstagg will go as well.” Darcy said, gesturing to Thor robust friend who smiled warmly. Bal relaxed a bit and Darcy breathed a sigh of relief. “Go on. I’ll call you back in a bit and I’ll tell you what our decision is, okay?”

Bal nodded slowly, his strand of hair slipping from his braid. The Frigga must have been strong in her that day, because she suddenly had a lot of care for this little dude. She’d hate for anything bad to happen to him.

“Hey.” Darcy said, getting to her knees again, ignoring the throb in her arm. “I promise, we’re not going to hurt you.”

Bal gave the crowd behind Darcy an untrusting look, “My people killed your people when…we…mean not to harm Asgard.”

“We’re in the middle of figuring this out now.” Darcy assured, “Believe me, dude, I know the Takaran don’t want to pick fights with Asgard. They don’t want to die any more than I want a sword up my ass.”
Bal giggled at her crude humor and Darcy patted herself on the back. Maybe she was pretty good at this kid thing. With more effort than should have been necessary, Darcy stood, making sure Bal was comfortable going with Volstagg and Sif to the clearing so Matella could eat.

The little guy’s absence left Darcy free to discuss with Tyr and Thor.

Unsurprisingly, Thor was the first to speak. “Darcy, what are you up to? His people deceived us.”

“His people were deceived.” Darcy spat back, rubbing her eyes. “Gohun sent his son to send a message. From what I’ve read of the chief, he seems like a nice guy. The Takaran are one of the largest clans, but also one of the most peaceful. They don’t even carry weapons unless they’re going to battle.”

“It is true.” Hogun grumbled from behind Tyr. “They are both trusting and trustworthy.”

“If Gohun gave his word that he wants to talk, we should acquiesce and speak with him. Maybe he can help us with this whole thing.” Darcy persuaded, already planning out their trip.

There was silence as Thor stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“Very well.” He said, giving in, “How many men should accompany us?”

“None.” Darcy responded and Thor’s denial was palpable. She shook her head, stepping forward, urging him to listen. “Hear me out. Takara is, what? A three days journey from here if we take the long way? How much longer do you think that’ll take with the men? Not to mention, the more people we have with us, the bigger target we make. The Takaran people will feel less threatened if it’s just the two of us.”

Darcy waited in anticipation, staring Thor down, hoping to channel all of the Frigga vibes. She needed them to go.

At last, he spoke. “Fine. We shall accompany the child to Takara and see what Gohun has to say. Pray that we do not die.”

Victorious, Darcy lifted her chin. “I’ll get Hel and Bal. But first,” she turned to Tyr seriously, “Tyr, you’ve got to be in charge while Thor and I are away. Find something to keep the men busy. Start a project, be productive, do something to keep them from being idle.”

Tyr placed a fist over his heart dutifully, “Of course.”

“And,” Darcy continued, inhaling deeply, “I want you to talk to Bjarte. Keep him at a distance, make sure no one has contact with him except you.”

“What do you wish that I discover from him?” Tyr asked, leaning in closer to hear her details.

But Darcy didn’t have much to say. “Answers. Just talk to him and when I come back, relay to me what he said.”

Tyr gave her a look, “I’m beginning to think it would pain you to make my life easier.”

At his words, the ever constant baggage of guilt in her chest weighed more heavily upon her heart. “I’m sorry, Tyr. I didn’t mean—“

Instantly, Tyr understood his mistake and gently took her hands. “I was only teasing, Darcy. I apologize. It is an honor to keep the men busy and I will be happy to do so till you return. And I
shall look after Loki as well.”

The mention of Loki struck Darcy with the first notion of indecision she’d experienced since Bal’s deliverance of his father’s message.

If she left to go speak with Gohun, she wouldn’t be able to stay with Loki.

She reasoned with herself; if she didn’t go talk to Gohun, she’d never be able to reveal Bjarte for the sneak he was and Loki wouldn’t get back to Asgard where the healers could fix him.

Solemnly, she squeezed Tyr’s hand in a trusting promise. “We’ll come back. Stay safe, Tyr.”

The kind-faced High Lord who looked only slightly older than herself smiled warmly, taking her into a tight hug. “I have the utmost faith in you.”

Darcy nodded silently, returning his embrace despite the pain in her arm.

They released one another and Tyr sighed sadly, though humor sparked in his eyes, “Tell me, does your love for Loki make this whole situation worse? Is your heart beat faint without the strength of his accompaniment? The monorhythmic symphony of your love having taken descent to the underlying thrum in the music of lover’s agony.” he clasped his hands dramatically over his chest, “Oh the anguish of being in love!” he bat his lashes, sticking out his lower lip in a theatrical pout. “How I long for it.”

Darcy couldn’t help but laugh and give him an affectionate shove. “How are you a High Lord?”

“I’ve no idea.” Tyr answered shaking his head, clueless. “But we’ll worry about my leadership later. The sooner you leave, the sooner you get back.”

Taking a deep breath, Darcy readied herself for the shit storm she was about to walk into. “Yeah. I’ll call my horse.”

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Darcy decidedly hated traveling without Loki.

Going anywhere with Loki meant you went in comfort. He could usually just magically take them where they needed to go. Plus, Loki always knew how to have fun on trips. He was good company and knew how to share space on a fucking horse.

Bal and his horse Matella were fine travel companions. Bal lead the way, occasionally telling them to watch out for a dip in the ground of an exposed root. They followed a well used trail through the forest for most of the day before coming upon an expanse of grasslands.

The real problem was Thor who was just being super annoying.

First of all, he didn’t have a horse because he didn’t bring Gareth and the rest of the Asgardian horses had died in battle. Gods rest their souls.

That meant that Thor rode Hel along with Darcy.

The bad thing was that Hel really didn’t like Thor and vice versa.

It wasn’t so bad at first. Darcy had convinced Hel that since Loki was hurt, Thor had to come with them to talk to Gohun. The quickest way to do that would be to let Thor ride her. Hel was reluctant at first but allowed Thor to mount her nonetheless.
Thor wasn’t making life easy for himself. He was equally disinclined to ride Hel as she was to carry him and she took it as an offense and sought to avenge her pride by jostling her rear as much as possible, therefore causing Thor to waver and nearly fall at least once every hour.

Some small, selfish part of Darcy wished that she’d brought Frank and Fenrir along. Although Hel often acted apathetic around the small creatures, Darcy had no doubts of the level of affection she held for them. They would have made the journey much easier.

But she needed them back at camp to look after Loki. She trusted Tyr with every fiber of her body, but potential threats were everywhere. Someone wanted Loki dead and she couldn’t be in two places at once. Frank and Fenrir would take care of him, they loved Loki too.

Bal laughed to himself, patting his horse’s neck as she halted in her tracks to release a rather horrendous fart. “Matella! You shake the ground!”

Darcy chuckled, coughing at the near toxic aroma of Matella’s gas. “That’s ripe.”

“By the gods,” Thor swore ducking his head to the side, “I have not smelled anything so terrible since Volstagg at the Sprouting Festival.”

Darcy made a face at the memory, “Oh, with the egg competition? Dude, don’t remind me. I never thought I’d be able to breathe right again.”

Thor let out a hearty laugh, gripping tighter to Darcy as Hel took and unnecessary leap over a small creek that Matella had trotted over with ease. The action put an end to Thor’s humor and he cleared his throat, lessening his hold around Darcy’s middle. “Are you positive that Loki had nothing to do with that? It reeked of his mischief.”

Darcy smirked, shrugging. The Sprouting Festival took place every spring and usually consisted of tons of competitions. Asgardians couldn’t do simple competitions like seeing who could pick the most flowers or who raised the fattest sow. No…they had wrestling matches and tournaments centered around eggs.

One of these lovely contests consisted of the women taking thousands of rotten eggs and throwing them at scantily clad men. The men had to avoid getting hit by the eggs; the man covered with the most rotten egg lost and had to be thrown in the nearest body of water. It was a good time.

However, a couple of springs ago, there had been an egg eating competition. People competed to see who could eat the most boiled eggs. Somehow the rotten eggs and the eggs meant for eating had gotten switched and, surprisingly, no one noticed until all of the egg eaters were sick with the most pungent, acrid flatulence anyone had ever had the displeasure of having.

No one could prove it was Loki, not even Darcy. But if the falsely innocent expression on his face was anything to go by, it was all his fault.

“Probably.” Darcy said pushing back the anxieties provoked by talk of Loki. Still, the memory inspired a spur of emotion to wrack her heart. She found herself caught in worlds that no longer existed. Separate universes lost in time where she and Loki were smaller, they sought after Infinity Stones like they were some game. They read books and had tickle fights, having not a care in the world for anything but the present moment.

She remembered Loki when they first met. His eyes seemed too big for his head, looking at her like she was a strange being. When they first met, he’d pegged the truth. She was a creature from another realm, soon to become the most familiar person to him.
Darcy was drawn from her thoughts by Bal’s sudden halt before them.

His pause was abrupt as he cocked his head to the side, listening to the odd silence of the forest intensely. In an instant, he was like prey in the sight of a hungry predator, caution ran off him in waves.

“Come,” Bal whispered, encouraging Matella to keep going at a slower pace. “Slow.”

Hel seemed unconcerned with whatever Bal believed to be happening and continued at her own pace until she was side by side with Matella. Bal’s large brown eyes widened in surprise at their boldness.

“Darcy, there is trouble.” Bal warned, pointing to the ground ahead of them.

Darcy knew he was pointing at something significant, but she didn’t have her glasses and whatever he wanted her to see just looked like a brown, fuzzy lump.

Thor huffed behind her, “Horse droppings?”


A chill itched down Darcy’s spine at the mention of the Meiri. She respected them as warriors and sorceresses, but they were kind of terrifying. Just the way they moved was reminiscent of a viper’s predatory slink, poised and ready to attack. It was no secret that they were a symbol of power on Vanaheim. They kept the peace simply by existing. If anyone put a toe out of line with the Meiri, they were going to pay.

Darcy gently tugged on Hel’s reigns, allowing Bal to guide them. “Go ahead, Bal. We’ll be on our guard.”

The boy nodded in understanding, encouraging Matella to move a little faster.

Thor gripped Mjolnir, raising it as he surveyed the area, keeping a keen eye out for threats. The back of Darcy’s neck pricked uncomfortably, like she was being watched.

She had no way to prove that the Meiri were watching, but she had no doubts that they were keeping a sharp eye out to make sure she stuck to their deal. She was still trying to catch the traitor.

Darcy didn’t worry about the Meiri killing her, at least not yet. But it was still a little unnerving to think that a bunch of territorial Amazonian-like women were lurking in the shadows, ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

Though, as the three continued on their journey, it would seem that Darcy’s apprehensions were unfounded. By nightfall there hadn’t been even the trace of trouble.

Thor suggested that they continue on through the night, but Darcy disagreed and Bal shook his head vigorously. ‘Big monsters’ roamed the night according to Bal and although Thor assured him that he could take any beast they encountered, Bal insisted that they stop until daybreak.

Darcy was so beat that she only nodded, dismounting Hel with the little energy she had left. Her body ached from riding and exhaustion and she needed to change the bandages on her arm; at this point, she was sure the cut was infected.

Closing her eyes, she slumped to the ground, groaning at the stiffness in her muscles. Even with her
face pressed in the dirt and Hel nudging her foot in impatience, Darcy heard Bal’s stifled giggles. She let out another dramatized groan for his benefit and smiled at his laughter. Soon, she felt his hand patting the back of her head. “Darcy, don’t sleep on the ground. Worms eat your face.”

With an agonized sigh, Darcy sat up, acknowledging their surroundings. The trees had progressively gotten closer together as they’d continued toward their final destination. Bal had already strung a small grass hammock between two low hanging branches.

Bal followed her gaze, his bright little smile turning to a frown, a fan of stray hair from his braid formed a mane around his worried face. “You have no bed?” anxiety worked its way around his little self when Darcy shook her head and he blabbered a great many things in his native language that Darcy couldn’t fully understand. Not because she didn’t comprehend the language, but because Bal wasn’t the most articulate little dude when he was upset.

Thor, who had been busy giving Hel the stink eye, was now engaged in their conversation.
“Worms you say?”

Bal nodded, pointing to the ground and Darcy recalled several Vanir tall-tales parents told their children to make them stay in bed at night. There was some strong compulsion among children on Vanaheim to get up in the middle of the night to play. Like how human kids never wanted to go to bed at night, Vanir kids didn’t want to stay in bed.

So, there were stories about little monster worms that lived in the ground that would eat people who left their beds at night.

Darcy took the boy’s shoulders giving them a reassuring squeeze, “Bal, it’s cool. I mean, Thor and I will be fine. The worms won’t hurt us.”

His lower lip quivered, “Are you adult?”

“Close enough.” Darcy said, scooting to the nearest tree and leaning against the trunk heavily. “Thor’s an adult...kinda.”

Thor grinned, accepting the jest. “I am of age.”

Bal calmed considerably at this, letting loose a large yawn, stretching out his limbs and messing his hair. “We will go at morning. We are going fast.”

“When do you think we’ll arrive in Takara?” Thor queried, removing his thick armor and cape to reveal a sleeveless tunic. When he finished, he sat beside Darcy and watched the little boy clamber into his grass hammock curiously.

Bal yawned again, taking a sleepy look at his surroundings. “Soon. Tomorrow.”

Thor seemed confused by this answer, but Bal was already snoozing by the time he had another question ready. The prince sighed, crossing his arms and staring up at the canopy. “Did he not say that it took him three days to reach our camp from Takara?”

Darcy pursed her lips watching Matella kneel down beside her little rider. “Yeah. But I also think he took a longer route to get to us.”

“How do you mean?” Thor asked, “Would he not take the same path both ways?”

Sighing tiredly, Darcy let her head fall back against the tree and stared up at the darkened canopy, lightened only slightly by the moons and stars.
“There are hundreds of stories about how dangerous the forest on Vanaheim is. It’s extremely rare that anyone would be able to walk through as we have without interruption from someone or something that wants us dead.” She explained, letting her eyes flutter shut. “Bal took three days to get to our camp. He’s just a kid and he traveled with no weapon.”

Thor’s brow furrowed, “You’re suggesting that we’ve been tricked?”

“No.” Darcy said, shaking her head. “I’m saying that we’re being guarded.”

“Guarded? By whom?”

Adjusting herself against the tree, Darcy wondered how crazy she’d sound if she told Thor the truth of what she believed. Probably like she was a few nuts short of a squirrel’s full hibernation pantry, but she figured she was right. “The Meiri.”

Thor gaped at her, “The tribe that aided you and Sif during battle?”

“Yeah.” Darcy whispered, muffling a yawn in her hand. “They want to know who the traitor is just as bad as we do. They like peace on Vanaheim and anyone who messes with their peace gets it.”

Stroking his beard thoughtfully, Thor considered her speculation. “I suppose we’d better work to restore peace then.”

Darcy laughed quietly into the darkness, shifting into a more comfortable position, using Thor’s shoulder as a pillow. Although she totally loved Loki with all her heart, and although Thor annoyed the living shit out of her sometimes, he was still pretty cut and his beefy biceps made comfy pillows.

Just as she was about to doze off into a restless sleep, Thor cleared his throat and spoke her name roughly, “Darcy.”

She side-eyed him, trying to hold back her loathsome glare. “Yes?”

He cleared his throat again, running a hand through his perfect golden locks. As far as Darcy knew, he hadn’t seen a bar of soap in three days. So why did his hair look so good? Hm? Why couldn’t her hair look that nice after three days?

“Darcy, I’d like to apologize….”

She waved him off, snuggling her face in his arm as if it were a pillow. “It’s fine. Just be quiet and don’t move.”

“Not for waking you, though I’ll apologize for that as well.” He said, patting her head affectionately, “I meant for what happened in Kitan.”

There was a large part of Darcy wished dearly that she could just magic a roll of duct-tape into existence and use it to keep Thor silent. But larger yet was the part of her that knew Thor was to be king one day and thus far in his life, he’d taken to thinking that things like lying to girls for sex and acting strictly on emotion and impulse were acceptable. Part of her wanted to sit him down and teach him what was socially acceptable and what was called ‘being an asshole’.

But she couldn’t very well do that. Instead, she sat up, looking at him with a steady gaze. “I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.”

He grit his teeth, looking away from her. “I know. But you deserve an apology nonetheless.”
Darcy rolled her eyes, setting her head back down on his arm. “Don’t do it again.”

She didn’t get to hear Thor’s promise to respect her wishes, for she was already fast asleep, soaking up all the rest she could in the few short hours she had before daybreak.

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Tyr strolled through camp, scratching the slight bits of stubble on his chin. It was one of the more annoying things about forever being a youth, any beard he tried to grow was sparse and light in color.

But the state of his facial hair was the least of his current concerns.

Managing the men had, in part, been Darcy’s doing. Although she thanked him and credited him with guiding them through the wait, it was she who directed them. Training them in survival skills, organizing hunting groups, setting up the camp…most of it had been her.

Thor had also done his part to work with them, encourage them, keep their spirits up with his good humor and light attitude. But Tyr wasn’t blind. The blonde prince was all but challenging Darcy for control. It humored Tyr that the Crown Prince would have to compete with a sweet little lady like Darcy for military power.

Of course, both of them were gone now and that left Tyr to his duties.

Last night had gone alright, though tensions were thick within the camp. Tyr was on guard, prepared for the break.

In his experience, there was always a break in the tension. When all of the pent up anger and confusion and pain broke the men and fighting ensued. There would be arguing and, if not contained properly, bloodshed.

If it came to that, Tyr believed he would have to implore his sister to break them up. It pleased him to an outrageous extent that the men respected her strength. She was truly one of the greatest warriors in the bunch, though not purely out of skill. While her expertise was proficient, Tyr believed that it was her purpose that honed her ability.

He had not spoken to her, intent on keeping to the law that banned their communication, but he knew that Sif’s love for Sigyn and vice versa was no small part in her avidness for a greater title. Perhaps if Sif became one of the elite, it would be a more acceptable position for Sigyn to marry.

Of course, Tyr had no proof that this was his sister’s thinking. His poor little romantic heart was running away with him. But he couldn’t help it; Sif and Sigyn were so precious. Their love must be protected at all costs.

Taking a fresh breath of morning air, Tyr stopped before the dying coals of a fire that had been blazing the night before.

The other thing to worry about was sex. Tyr was plagued with most vivid memories of his comrades’ desires during their time on Jotunheim. For the aching, frozen days of boredom, sitting for hours on end in freezing caves with nothing to do but each other, the men in his squad had lusted after each other like rabbits in the springtime.

Needless to say, Tyr had not participated. He’d been even younger then and was perturbed by the entire situation.
Now that he was older, he would be sure that everyone who needed their...needs...met would have an appropriate place to get on with that without permanently scarring anyone. And they could do so safely to avoid disease. Kitan had given them extra soap and Tyr would be sure that his men stayed clean. This had been one of Darcy’s main priorities, which everyone stay sanitary to keep illness and vermin away the best they could.

Tyr stretched his hands out over the coals, warming his fingers in the heat. For a moment, all was at peace. The birds were chirping, there were only slight rustles of the men stirring from their slumber, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

That’s when the break happened.

There was a shout across the camp, and a retaliating curse followed by the jeers of several men. Tyr closed his eyes, bracing himself for the storm to come.

He jogged through the camp, following the rush of early rising men to the outside of one of the smaller tents where two men in their undergarments were rolling in the dirt, trying to punch each other in the face.

Tyr set his jaw, glaring down at the men. Really, he wasn’t that mad, but maintaining order was a must. If he learned anything from Odin, it was that chaos was only acceptable in the heat of battle. Otherwise, it was best to be orderly.

His fiery attitude worked and the men gave him wide berth to take the brawling boys by their shirts and lift them from the ground. “Hætta!”

At once the two stopped struggling and Tyr released them, watching them clench their fists, making sneering dirtily at one another. Suddenly, the High Lord was struck with an idea. Most, if not all, of the men here had not been to war. They were sons of those who’d fought in the war past. They were all clueless.

Putting on a show, Tyr glared down at the boys with disgust. “This is a disgrace. You are warriors, are you not?! And here you are rolling in the dirt and for what?”

One of the men jabbed a finger at the other, preparing an accusatory answer to Tyr’s rhetorical question. But the lord would have none of it, continuing on with his speech.

“This is war, men! We don’t deal with our problems by starting some simple brawl!” Tyr berated them, now speaking to the crowd. He circled the two boys, unable to completely hide his grin, “Do you know how we handled things in Jotunheim? When men were so cold their family jewels turned as blue as the terrain? Do you know how we used to settle our arguments?”

Everyone was silent as Tyr’s questioning became more intense. “Well? Anyone?”

A chorus of ‘no’s sang through the crowd and Tyr eyed them all carefully, “We took it to the pit.”

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The pit was an entirely made up concept, but Tyr thought it was pretty clever. Nothing made men feel more productive than beating each other to a pulp and Tyr intended to use that to his benefit.

Darcy had given him guidance and he would take it upon himself to fulfill what needed to be done. These men needed entertainment. They needed to feel like they were doing something more than just waiting for days on end. Tyr’s solution was The Pit.
If anyone had a problem with anyone else at the camp, they would challenge them to fight in The Pit. They would wrestle until someone gave in or they felt that they’d settled their dispute. Tyr believed it to be rather barbaric, but who was he to judge? He’d spent most of his morning romanticizing their return home and the possibility of meeting the love of his life by happenstance.

Tyr didn’t know how successful The Pit would be, seeing how they had limited healing resources. He need only have it work until Darcy and Thor returned with possible answers.

It was simple enough to land a stake in the ground and designate a naturally formed valley as a suitable pit for the men to fight out their disagreements and keep the camp’s tension under control. He established the rules and the penalties for disobeying them. If an individual were to continue to beat their opponent after he surrendered, they would be sentenced to a confinement cell within the bunker for two days on Vanaheim.

The Pit wasn’t Tyr’s ideal solution, but by midday, the idea seemed to have thrived. Asgardians and their want for battle ran deep enough that even fighting one’s comrades was adequate means of sating their tensions.

He watched them now, the sun high in the sky as two men tossed each other around in the grass.

Overlooking The Pit was busy work for his eyes while his mind went on to more important things such as fulfilling Darcy’s requests concerning Lord Bjarte.

Tyr had never truly liked the other High Lord. In the times that Tyr had met with him concerning the trade relationships between Thryheim and Nornheim. More often than not, Bjarte would rather insistently challenge him to a game of Hnefatafl. Tyr always refused. He hated the game, personally. He didn’t know why, but strategy games always struck a nerve with him.

Despite his odd fixation of games, Tyr still didn’t like Lord Bjarte. Perhaps it was the way he belittled Darcy and actively spited Frigga and Loki, perhaps Tyr simply just didn’t like his beard; whatever the reason, Tyr knew the man was not to be trusted.

But Darcy had been unhelpfully unspecific about what she wanted him to talk to Bjarte about. Obviously she wanted answers regarding Loki and the betrayal. Tyr’s challenge was to see if Bjarte knew anything. How was he to do that exactly?

Tyr inhaled deeply, the heavy scent of summer and sweat wiping away the complications in his mind. Sometimes things appeared more complex than they really were. Like talking to a suspected war criminal. Tyr would go into that room just as he would to any meeting. Because he wasn’t in there to pass judgment or make accusations; he was there to do his best to support the Realm Eternal and all her people.

Relaxing into this mentality, Tyr allowed a slight smile to creep onto his face. He glanced around the area, seeking out his sister in the crowd.

She wasn’t hard to spot as the one lady among the bunch. She stood with Volstagg, Fandrall and Hogun, laughing at something Volstagg had said. Even from where he stood, he could hear the little snort in her laugh and he nearly cried at the sound. He wondered how often she laughed now. Did Sigyn love the sound?

What was he saying? Of course Sigyn loved the sound! Oh they were so precious. He couldn’t wait until he was finally able to communicate with his sister again. He was going to tell Sigyn all of the embarrassing stories of Sif when she was younger and try to keep his heart from strangling itself on how happy he was at them being together.
Now all he needed was for someone to love him with such passion….  

Maybe one day.

The time was not right. He had a crime to solve and a High Lord to speak with.

Squaring his shoulders and willing himself not to give way to pure excitement, Tyr made his way over to the three warriors and his sister. At his approach, they ceased their laughter, putting their fists over their hearts in respectful greeting.

“Lord Tyr.” The four of them chorused.

He nodded to each, slightly humored by the fact that Odin had trusted him of all people with such a position. High Lord Tyr…even after all these years it still seemed odd to him.

“Stop that, all of you.” He minded them, echoing Frigga’s sentiment when he referred to her too formally. “I have a few matters to discuss with High Lord Bjarte. I would ask that two of you remain here to guard The Pit and two of you accompany me into his current chambers.”

The four nodded among themselves and Tyr dealt with a secret turmoil over whether or not he’d rather have Sif accompany him or stay. He had no say in the matter, really.

In the end, it was decided that Sif and Hogun would flank him while Fandrall and Volstagg stayed behind.

Pleased with their decision, Tyr thanked them and lead Sif and Hogun towards the bunker, talking them through his thoughts.

“I’m going to keep this fairly informal,” he told them, holding the bunker door open for the two of them to enter. “Darcy is the leader of this investigation. I am merely going to ask him whether he knows anything about the betrayal and Prince Loki’s injury.”

He made sure to address Hogun instead of Sif seeing as how he could technically get into trouble with the law and his parents for talking to her. They both agreed nonetheless, following him down the hall towards the room in which they’d set Darcy while she was unconscious. Before they reached her healing room, Tyr took a sharp left, opening one of the heavy wooden doors, revealing a narrow stairway.

He grabbed one of the torches from the wall and started down the stairs, breathing in the musty air that held faint traces of pressed grapes and honey. At last they reached the bottom of the stairs, a large, spacious cellar. Large barrels stood sat still under thick blankets of dust, determined to ferment their contents no matter the neglect they’d been paid.

In the very center of the cellar stood a steel-barred cage that was just tall enough that Tyr would be able to stand in it without bumping his head on the bars above. The thick, sturdy structure was rusted from years of being locked away and although the confines seemed rickety at first glance, the bars were built into the ground.

The contents of the cage were even more pitiful and filthy, their sad appearance accentuated by the meager light of Tyr’s torch.

Sitting in one corner was a bucket that reeked of waste and a tray of bones that had been picked clean. A small rodent gnawed on a remaining shred of fat, its small mouth greedily lapping at what little it could get from the sorry scraps.
At last Tyr brought his gaze upon the purpose of his visit, attempting to maintain a pleasant expression. High Lord Bjarte stood in the center of the cage, his beard dirty and in need of a proper combing, dark splotches of blood matted in his hair and his eyes squinted at the paltry torchlight.

Thor had been responsible for the treatment of Lord Bjarte and while Tyr had no great amount of fondness for Bjarte, every sympathetic nerve in his body ached at the sight of the High Lord’s conditions.

But in spite of Tyr’s poorly disguised solicitude, Lord Bjarte addressed his visitors as if nothing was out of the ordinary. They could have been visiting him in Nornheim in his castle, drinking tea over a game of Hnefatafl.

“High Lord Tyr,” he greeted, his voice as smooth as honey, each drop of his voice embedded with a taste of ulterior-motive. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Tyr lifted his chin, forcing a slight smile. “I am sure.”

Bjarte stroked his beard, the tread of his fingers through the coarse hair doing little to straighten the mess that days without wash had left him in. He hummed, responding to Tyr with an air of ease that seemed quite out of place considering his position. “I must say I was expecting someone else. Short, dark hair, an uncanny loyalty to Asgard’s second in line to the throne…?”

His attitude unnerved Tyr, though he tried his best not to let it show. Odin always told him that he tried too hard to see the best in people rather than suspect the worst and Tyr was willing to believe that perhaps this was one of the instances in which he should have taken a more aggressive approach. Bjarte was captured, very clearly in a state of vulnerability. And though he sat in the claw of his predatory captors, he did not flail and squirm like prey.

After a long moment of Tyr scrutinizing the man he was now gravely suspicious of, he answered Bjarte’s open-ended question. “She is currently indisposed, though she sends her regards.”

“Indisposed…” Bjarte repeated, chuckling only just. “I see. She is hurt?”

Bjarte’s eyes flashed with venom and Tyr decided he’d best make use of the weird-bearded Lord’s ignorance to Darcy’s whereabouts. “She is. You attacked her.” Tyr said, handing his torch to Sif, “I hear that you nearly killed her.”

“Defense, my fellow Lord. The lady threatened me in battle.” Bjarte replied innocently.

Tyr chose his next words with special care. He did not wish to berate Bjarte or make any accusations. He only wished to talk in hopes of gaining information that could help Darcy cure Loki.

“I see.” Tyr said reasonably, clutching his hands behind his back. “Why is it that she threatened you, do you think?”

Bjarte narrowed his light colored eyes that glinted even in the darkness. “You mean to test me, Lord Tyr?”

Tyr sighed heavily, kneading his brow. He was quite honest in his character and found it best to tell Bjarte the truth of his visitation. “No, Bjarte. I mean to talk.”

“Talk?” Bjarte queried openly.

“Yes.” Tyr said with a frown, “I’m not here as a spy or a power to intimidate. I elicit no trickery. I
am here as an Asgardian in search of the truth.”

Bjarte gazed at Tyr for a moment, as if reading his sincerity from a distance. When he’d finished, he scoffed, “The truth? Tyr, you evade truth as if it were a disease. You befriend monsters and defend their honor when they have none.”

Tyr stared at Bjarte, aghast by his sudden aggressiveness.

“You seem surprised.” Bjarte taunted, stepping slowly to the bars of his cell, beginning to act like the caged animal he resembled. “You, High Lord Tyr, trusted most dearly by the Allfather. He loves you, perhaps even more than his own son.” Bjarte paused, chuckling to himself. “Or perhaps he considers you a replacement.”

Tyr glared, though he continued to listen to the madman’s ramblings.

“You have that which a king could want from a son,” Bjarte whispered through his bars, “Rich Asgardian blood.”

Tyr clenched his jaw, sure that Bjarte needed a healer to cure whatever insanity ailed him. “Odin has sons. If you remember, one of them is gravely injured.”

“Prince Loki…” Bjarte trailed off with a disappointed sigh, “You misunderstand him just as his beloved little advisor misunderstands him and as he misunderstands himself. You want to see him cured, High Lord Tyr? Would that please you?”

Tyr nodded only slightly, suddenly very aware of his sword and how fast he would have to draw it to defend himself against whatever Bjarte had creeping eerily behind those bars. He would talk to Odin about having Bjarte removed from his position as High Lord. He was clearly not in the best state of mind.

“Then admit it.” Bjarte said simply grasping the bars of his cage. “Admit it! Admit that he’s a monster! The beasts you slaughtered on the frozen plains lurk beneath your nose! Ask your precious king and queen! The mother and father you never had! ADMIT IT!”

Tyr took an involuntary step back from the cage, swallowing his fear in a single gulp. “Thank you for your time, High Lord Bjarte. Is there anything I can bring you to make you more comfortable?”

Bjarte breathed heavily, falling to the ground in a disoriented heap. “I wish for Advisor Darcy to grace me with her presence. And perhaps some water.”

Bowing his head, Tyr worried the inside of his cheek with his teeth. “I’ll see what I can do. Good day, Lord Bjarte.”

And with that, Tyr strode away, flanked by Sif and Hogun, deciding that this investigation was a great deal deeper than he anticipated. Gods only knew how Darcy was going to fit these pieces together.

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Darcy didn’t know how in Hel’s name she was going to make it any longer without a healer of sorts. Her entire body ached and her arm was throbbing with inexplicable pain. The only reason she was staying on Hel was because Thor was holding on tight to her middle.

The horse had noticed Darcy’s discomfort and quit trying to buck Thor off, instead focusing on riding as smoothly as possible.
Early that morning, Bal had woken them up and Thor braided the boy’s hair anew. Darcy watched from Hel’s side, a small smile lighting her tired lips. While Thor and Loki were very different, they both had some damn fine hair skills. Bal’s braid was perfect and Thor didn’t even have a comb.

After they were all up and had eaten a small breakfast of tree nuts and rainwater, it was non-stop riding. They were out of the forest by midday and Darcy nearly collapsed in the heat of the seemingly endless field they rode through.

Grass stood tall enough to brush Hel’s nose and there was seemingly no means to navigate the mess save the sky and a stray tree every now and then. Even so, Bal and Matella seemed to know where they were going.

At one point, she nearly fell off but Thor caught her with one powerful arm. He asked if she was alright and she only shrugged. She wasn’t. She felt like death was carrying her to a really painful grave. But she endured, persevering through the day. If there was any hope at all for Loki and Asgard, it was this trip.

Finally, when the sun began to set over the grassy horizon, the fuzzy outline of civilization came into Darcy’s line of sight. Bal was excited by the view of his home and sped up, waving for Hel to hurry along as well. Darcy encouraged Hel moving a little faster, biting her lip to hold back the shooting pain in her arm and dull throb in her chest.

They approached Takara and Darcy had to wait till they were within the tribe’s territory before she could make out any details. The clan was vast from what Darcy saw. Entering Takara was like walking into a city of grass houses that closely resembled Native American wattle. Children ran around in little packs, many of them stopping to greet Bal and pat Matella. The horse was used to the attention, nudging each of the kids on their way.

Most of the Takaran people steered clear of Hel, Darcy and Thor. She suspected it had to do with the fact that Hel looked half dead, but she tried not to take it personally and she hoped that Hel’s feelings weren’t hurt. She really was very sensitive about that kind of thing.

Once they’re little group reached a narrow brick path that led deeper into the village, Bal dismounted Matella, leading her to a small stable area and handing her reins to a short woman with a kind smile and a beautifully patterned tattoo on her sternum.

Darcy followed Bal’s lead, making to slide off Hel’s saddle, but she didn’t quite make it, collapsing to the ground in a tired heap.

“Shit.” She swore as Hel sniffed at her hair, concerned.

Darcy patted the bony part of Hel’s face soothingly, not sure how prepared she was to move yet. “Go on Hel. I’ll let you know when I’ve figured something out.”

Hel hesitated, huffing hot air over Darcy’s face.

Sitting up, Darcy gave her horse a stern look. “I’m fine, Hel. Or, at least, I will be soon. I have to talk to Gohun. Do you want to stay here or go hang out somewhere else?”

Rearing her head, black mane rippling in the hot summer air, Hel glanced around as if deciding whether or not she wanted to stay in Takara. With a final glance back at Darcy, she ran off, disappearing in the shadow between two short buildings.

There were a number of people staring, including Bal who seemed more shocked than scared. He shook his head cutely as if knocking away a strange sight, before frowning down at Darcy.
“Darcy, why you on ground?” the boy asked, wide brown gaze flicking between her and Thor.

With a grim smile, Darcy stood, her muscles screaming in protest. “I fell off my horse. Silly me, huh?”

Bal giggled, taking her hand. “Silly. Come, my father wait for you.”

Darcy jogged to keep up with Bal, taking in the sights and smells around her. She’d always wanted to visit the tribes in Vanaheim. Their lifestyle was just so different from her own and it intrigued her. Their own little brands of magic and culture… After the war was over, she had intended to get Loki to take her.

Thor tagged along behind her, Mjolnir in hand as they approached the building located in the center of the village. It was shaped a little bit like a longhouse, but was large enough to comfortably fit maybe twenty to thirty people. Rushing out the front door was a man of medium height with long black hair, streaked with grey and braided with grass. His shirt was open revealing a tattoo that matched Bal’s.

As soon as Bal caught sight of the man, he pulled Darcy faster, calling out to him. “Father! I bring Prince Thor and Darcy.”

Gohun acknowledged Thor and narrowed his eyes at Darcy, holding his hand out to his youngest son, speaking in his native tongue. “Thank you, my son. You have done very well. Are you hungry?”

Bal released Darcy to go and embrace his father warmly, kissing his cheek and nodding vigorously. “Darcy and Prince Thor are hungry too.”

Gohun’s gaze flicked to his visitors once more, patting his son’s head gently, “Go to your mother. She has made the meal.”

The boy noticed his father’s seriousness and gave Darcy and Thor nervous glances before sauntering off into the longhouse.

When his son was safely inside and a considerable sized crowd had gathered around Thor and Darcy’s confrontation with the tribe’s leader, Gohun faced his guests with uncertainty. “Welcome Prince Thor and…?”

“Darcy, Advisor to Princes Thor and Loki of Asgard.” Thor answered for her, walking to stand beside her, offering her his presence as support. It must have been pretty damn obvious that she was going to topple over if Thor was concerned.

Gohun gave a skeptical look to Thor’s hammer and Thor responded by respectfully setting down Mjolnir. “Forgive me, Chief Gohun. It has been a long journey. My brother, Prince Loki, was injured during battle, and since you requested both of our presence, Advisor Darcy saw it best to come as well.”

Darcy nodded in agreement, placing both her index and middle fingers to the space between her brows, dragging them down the bridge of her nose with her pinky extended as a sign of respect. It was an older gesture, typically used by the past generation of Vanir. It’s rarity would probably carry greater weight among the Takara.

“Chief Gohun,” Darcy addressed him, her voice cracking with tiredness, “It is a pleasure. Though I wish we’d met under better circumstances.”
This greeting worked a smile onto Gohun’s lined face. His Allspeak was considerably better than Bal’s, though heavily accented nonetheless. “Welcome, Advisor Darcy. And Prince Thor, I would rather ask that you forgive me. I would not pass blame onto you for arming yourself after the actions of my people against yours.”

Darcy touched Thor’s arm, indicating that he should leave his weapon on the ground. It would come to him if need be.

“Chief Gohun,” she addressed the tribal leader formally, “We believe that there was a misunderstanding. The Princes of Asgard are disinclined to think that the Takaran would want to war with the Realm Eternal.”

Gohun nodded stoically, his attention on Darcy. His gaze swept over her in a way that was all too similar to his son’s. Concern etched its way into his face. “I would like the opportunity to… explain.”

“We would grant you that opportunity.” Darcy replied, sure that Gohun wasn’t going to kill them. The look in his eyes was too clear; he needed their help. By the looks of it, the Takaran weren’t well enough equipped to fight Asgard’s full forces. The Einherjar would resort to total war if need be and the grassy plains of Takara would blaze.

Gohun bowed his head, respectfully placing a fist over his heart as was typical in Asgardian tradition. “Thank you, Advisor Darcy and Prince Thor. I would also offer you the chance to bathe and we could talk over a meal.”

Darcy had a really powerful urge to refuse, just so she could get back to her camp as soon as possible. But her entire being ached. Her ribs throbbed, her arm burned and her hair was in dire need of a wash. She glanced briefly at Thor who looked like he was ready to fight another war right then. Asgardians.

Relenting, she looked back at Gohun, forcing away a grimace. “That would be greatly appreciated.” Her arm panged with pain that verged on agony. “And, Chief Gohun,” she paused to take a deep breath, “Could we trouble you for fresh bandages?”

The Takaran were accommodating, hooking Darcy up with a really awesome underground bathhouse. Apparently there was a reserve of water right beneath Takara and they’d sectioned it off, diverting the river into two sections. One section was let be so the river could continue its natural current, the other part was used for drinking, swimming and taking up to the surface.

Smooth stone stairs lead down into the shallow gulch. The same woman that had taken Bal’s horse lead Darcy down the river’s shoreline, leaving narrow footprints in the black sand until they reached a gap in the wall of the fissure. It was a pathway, clearly man-made, a tunnel chiseled away for any number of people to trail through.

The passage was lit with traditional Takaran torches, small balls of fire fixed on the base of a cone. It looked like a bunch of fiery ice cream cones were stuck to the wall, but Darcy didn’t say that out loud.

At last they reached an enormous hot spring situated in a great stone basin. High above the tub was a crack in the ceiling that allowed a steady stream of sunlight to stream through. Steam rose from the surface, swirling in white curls to the open air far above.

The woman had left Darcy with bandages and an oil that lathered on her skin and smelled similar to pine or cedar.
Darcy indulged in the hot water, biting back a moan at how good it felt just to let her muscles relax. She wished Loki was there with her to hold her and kiss her and tell her everything would turn out in the end.

The thought of Loki formed a hard lump in her throat and she tried her best to swallow the sick feeling. He would be okay. She was figuring it out. She would bring Bjarte to justice and get him healed.

Reminded of her purpose, Darcy washed out her hair, doing her best to finger comb the matted curls that had made an appearance over the past few days. When her skin and hair was all clean, Darcy finally steeled herself, preparing to treat her cut.

The bandage had stuck to her upper arm with thick clumps of dried blood and she had to ease the fabric away in the heat of the hot spring.

The wound was not a pretty sight. Her blood had coagulated, forming a thick scab over the swollen skin where Bjarte had cut her. It was inflamed and in need of antibiotics. But there wasn't much she could do for it now. She needed Loki back or she was physically fucked, and not in the good way.

Taking special care, she cleaned out the wound with the pine soap, biting back a cry of pain as it stung her. Her eyes watered when she rinsed the wound and almost threw up when she squeezed a considerable amount of pus from the gash.

When the swelling had gone down and it seemed relatively disinfected, Darcy hoisted herself out of the hot spring, dressing the wound and adorning her undergarments and armor. Bathing had restored some of her energy and she backtracked all the way through the gorge, mentally readying herself to meet with Gohun.

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Gohun sat on his grass mat across from the blonde Prince of Asgard and the Advisor that had come with him. Bal had asked his permission to sit beside the girl and introduce her to all his favorite foods and watch her reaction to the different flavors.

The chief sat quietly, contemplating the presence of his guests who sat with his family, sharing a meal. He’s invited them with the intention of begging for forgiveness. He was not an Asgardian and would shed his dignity to spare the lives of his people. He’d sent Bal, his youngest son, because he did not believe the Aesir would be cruel enough to kill a child. If he’d sent someone else, they might be considered a threat and would be dead before he could properly deliver a message.

And Bal was a fast rider. The boy had a sense for danger and a skill for avoiding.

Gohun had not expected them so soon, nor had he expected that they would come unaccompanied by an army. It was very clear to him in the way that the Advisor spoke with his family and allowed his children to braid her hair with grass and crow feathers that they did not see the Takaran as a threat.

Gohun narrowed his eyes, watching the prince and the lady with intense scrutiny.

Prince Thor ate vigorously, gulping their mead as if they had it in abundance. Of course, a Prince of Asgard was accustomed to wealth and prosper. He did not know hard times. He talked idly to his eldest sons and they laughed politely at something he said.
He turned his attention over the Advisor Darcy. From where he sat, he could hear that she spoke in the language of his people and his daughters asked her questions about what it was like to be in such a high position of power. It had been a long time since the Takaran chief had been a woman, and he could see that Darcy intrigued them.

From what he could hear of their conversation, the young lady was quite intelligent and he patiently prolonged speaking with her to allow his daughters time with her. It was rare that anyone besides himself was in contact with anyone from Asgard. One day, it could be their responsibility to lead the Takaran and it was good for them to see Asgardians as something besides enemies or blonde bulls with smallish brains.

Bal now shifted into Darcy’s lap, toying with the end of her braid. Gohun considered minding his son to be polite. Bal was the most affectionate of all his children and Gohun found it exceedingly difficult to reprimand him for anything.

The Advisor only held the child as he asked her about the other prince.

Gohun listened more intently at this, fearful that it had been one of his men to harm Prince Loki. He’s met the younger prince only once. His tongue was sharp, as the Asgardians said. For the most part, he was quiet, speaking only when needed. But there was an underlying cleverness in him, like the snakes that hid in the denser grasses, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Darcy revealed nothing about how Prince Loki came by his injury, though she spoke fondly of him.

The chief closed his eyes, deciding how to tell them what he needed to.

The Asgardian Lord with the strange beard had tricked him years ago just after he’d been newly anointed his position as Head Chieftain, Speaker of the Free Land. He’d been invited to Asgard by King Odin and he’d obliged to represent the tribes of Vanaheim.

While he was there, a Lord had taken interest in him and invited him back to his province for a short stay before he returned to Vanaheim.

Gohun had been looking to make friends. Too often, the realms forgot Vanaheim’s tribes in favor of referring towards Vanaheim in its noble culture.

The young leader had been rallied into a silly Asgardian strategy game, and it was not until he lost that he realized he’d been trapped.

The magic that bound him to Lord Bjarte never faltered. He was bound to do as the Lord bid. Bjarte need only say a command to him and he would abide. Fortunately, there was great distance between them and Bjarte must speak the words for Gohun to abide by them.

It was years before Bjarte ever gave Gohun a command. He used Gohun to gain control over the other chiefs and when they were all in control, he bid that they provoke the capital.

Gohun had no desire to fight with his own realm’s occupants. War was unnecessary, especially with the capital. Their relationship was amiable and Gohun had no issue with it. But Bjarte’s wish was his command and he’d been forced into battle and forbidden to tell anyone of their communications.

Magic prevented him from telling Darcy and Prince Thor of Bjarte’s betrayal, but he hoped…he prayed that they would understand.
His daughters, Rea and Dthu giggled when Bal asked when she was going to marry Prince Loki. A faint blush crept around the advisor’s cheeks and she claimed that she and the second prince weren’t courting.

It was in that moment that Gohun was reminded of how young his Asgardian guests were. They’d fought in the war and were the same age as his children.

Gohun was drawn from his thoughts by a light touch on his shoulder. Mora, his beloved wife, stared down at him with large, knowing eyes. He squeezed her hand, thankful for her support and companionship. When he let go, she called attention to his nine children, beckoning for them to depart.

Bal pouted while Rea and Dthu excused themselves.

Darcy embraced them gingerly, favoring one arm over the other. “You guys should come to Asgard sometime. Or I’ll come visit when this is all over.”

Dthu smiled hopefully at the prospect, “Yes, Darcy. We will like that very much.”

Gohun cleared his throat, taking a sip from his cup and looking pointedly at his daughters and Bal. The time for pleasantries had come to an end. It was time for the stuff of importance.

When everyone had gone but The Prince, The Advisor and himself, Gohun addressed his guests. “I hope you are more comfortable now?”

Darcy bowed her head, “Yes, thank you, Chief Gohun, for your hospitality.”

“The pleasure is mine.” He replied, rather fond of the Asgardian civility. Many of the other tribes and even Queen Freya in the capital had a habit of making demands rather than requests, and having arguments rather than conversations. The Advisor was patient, though she most certainly had a right not to be.

Prince Thor opened his mouth to say something but Darcy gave him a quick look and he retreated into his silence. “Chief Gohun,” she began, folding her hands in her lap, her eyes trained on him like she knew exactly what she wished to say, “As I said before, Thor and I don’t believe that the Takaran or any of the tribes are fully responsible for the betrayal against Asgard.”

Gohun nodded solemnly, the magical restraint inflicted by High Lord Bjarte refusing to let him tell her the truth of the matter. That he was forced into making his men attack hers. “We are in agreement then, Advisor Darcy.”

She stared at him for a moment, her rather shocking blue eyes studying his face, waiting for more. Of course, he had very little to give her.

Finally, she spoke again, “Are you familiar with an Asgardian strategy game called Hnefltafl?”

The chief could not keep his eyes from widening and did not bother to mask his surprise. Did she already know of the evil Lord’s trickery?

Darcy pursed her lips, tapping her fingers on the grass mat before her. “I’ll take that as a yes. And judging by your reaction, you’re also familiar with High Lord Bjarte?”

Relief washed through him like a summer rain, washing away the dust and wetting the earth anew. “I know of him.”
The young Advisor cursed rudely in Allspeak, pushing a few stray hairs away from her face. “You can’t admit to anything, can you?”

Magic pulled at his tongue and he struggled for words that would obey Bjarte’s command. “I… cannot admit.”

Darcy got to her feet, unsteadily pacing the length of the longhouse while muttering to herself, “Magic…dammit, I need to learn magic.”

She stopped abruptly, looking back to Gohun with what looked like a slight revelation. “Chief Gohun, may I approach you?”

Gohun gave her a tentative, consenting nod, granting her permission to drop to her knees before him and place her small hands on either side of his head.

Seeing her up close for the first time, Gohun was shocked by the tiredness in her. While she was as young as he daughters, she seemed much older in comparison. Darcy focused on him, her brow wrinkled with effort, “Try and tell me the truth.”

Gohun was confused, but tried to tell her the truth even so. Again, his tongue froze in his mouth, weighed down by the heavy taste of honey.

Darcy released him almost immediately, cursing again under her breath. He dearly hoped she’d refrained from using that language around Bal. The boy already had eight elder siblings, he didn’t need another foul mouthed influence.

She pressed her palm to her forehead, lost in thought for a few moments. “I don’t have the magic to break the spell on you, or the skill for that matter.” She told him bitterly, “But I know someone who can. He can do it for you as well as anyone else bewitched you know.”

Gohun grew excited to hear this, leaning forward in anticipation, “Who?”

Darcy shook her head, “A friend. But I will need time and permission to return.”

Gohun stood as well, pressing his fingers between his brow, pointing his smallest finger in her direction, “You have it, Advisor Darcy.”

She mimicked the gesture, “Thank you. We will take our leave now.”

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Darcy couldn’t believe it had been that easy.

Bjarte.

It was Bjarte. His magical signature was so strong she could practically taste it on Gohun. She had her answers, now she just had to get proof.

She needed to break the spell that Bjarte had used to gain control of his victims.

Well, there was no way that she, a mortal with no magical training could relieve him of the curse. She needed Loki.

Loki would be able to break the spell. It might take him an hour or so to figure out how to undo the magic, but he could do it. Bjarte might believe he was a great trickster, but Darcy could tell his magic wasn’t nearly as strong as some. His methods were simplistic and straightforward, making
rough, traceable, magical pathways.

Loki would be able to undo this.

Outside the longhouse, Darcy called to Hel, pleased to have her sprinting from the depths of Takara with eager enthusiasm, her bones clicking together in a mere whisper.

Thor followed her out, radiating confusion. “Darcy, what--?”

She mounted Hel, blood rich with adrenaline. “Come on. We’ve gotta get back to camp.”

“Now?” Thor asked, casting a weary glance back to the longhouse. “Darcy--?”

“Now!” Darcy insisted, jerking her head for him to follow her up.

Reluctantly, he surrendered, mumbling regretful things as he situated himself behind her.

“Hel,” Darcy spoke to her horse urgently, “How quickly can you get us back to Loki?”

The black and bone mare reared, releasing a determined neigh into the dark, dark night. When her hooves met the ground again, she charged through the field grass houses of Takara and into the open grassy plains.

Darcy held on with all her might, whispering a promise to the hot wind, “I’m coming Loki. I’m coming.”

***

Frigga sat at her scrying pool, eagerly watching for glimpses of Darcy’s progress.

The poor girl was working as fast as she could and Frigga feared it wasn’t enough. There was no way for Darcy to tell, she had not the magic nor the technology, but Loki was dying. It was slow, painful.

The Queen knew Darcy had the knowledge to cure Loki. He had done most of it himself. Only the antidote to the poison Bjarte had infected Loki with was a lethal concoction to Asgardians.

Yes, the common antidote would kill an Asgardian or a mortal when consumed.

But it would cure a Frost Giant.

Frigga paced her chambers, the trail of her gown flaring behind her as she feuded with herself.

Darcy could not keep the secret of Loki’s heritage. But what was more important? The secret or his life?

Or were they one in the same?

Frigga considered her options.

Curing Loki herself would no doubt require her to disobey the Allfather’s rule during a wartime crisis. Queen or not, that would earn her an execution or a sentence that made death preferable. The people would never see her the same again. Disobeying him secretly and taking a secret passage between realms was a possibility, but Heimdall was always watching.

He was sworn to tell the King of anyone disrespecting his word.
The repercussions of her going to Vanaheim were too great. Gaining permission from Odin would require telling him the entire truth of Loki’s predicament.

Like most of the Asgardian population, Odin was just as confused as to who the culprit was as anyone and he was unaware of Loki’s severe condition.

Even though she had pleaded, begged him to let Loki be taken home, he had refused. Frigga as soon as groveled, asking him to let Loki come back to the healers. But Odin insisted that if Loki was to be a man he would suffer through the same fate as the other injured men.

He would hear no more on the matter.

That left Darcy.

Frigga had seen in her scrying pool two possible futures and neither of them were desirable.

The first she saw being that Darcy cures Loki and slowly comes to know the truth, revealing her suspicions to him at the peak of his adolescence. While Darcy would love him even so, Loki would loathe himself and reject her as well as everyone else he loved. Frigga did not see everything in that future; she sensed the cold, foreboding whisper of death. It scared her so much that she trembled and tears welled in her eyes.

No… Darcy couldn’t know.

The second future sickened her, but it was no doubt the safer option.

Darcy would discover the antidote for Loki and she would have her suspicions. The young, trusting girl would bring her queries to Frigga and the Allmother would wipe the thought from her mind. She would not take the memories of her healing Loki, but rather any notion of what Loki could be. It would be smooth and her magical touch would leave no trace.

Guilt squeezed her heart, tormented tears slipping down her cheeks as she made her decision.

She would burden herself with this lie…this betrayal of Darcy’s trust…in favor of saving her son’s life.

***

Thor sat with Sif outside the bunker late one evening, passing the time by watching the men fight in The Pit.

It had been two days since he and Darcy returned from visiting Gohun. After they arrived, the little lady had promptly fallen off her horse. She had paid no mind, proceeding to stand up, brush herself off, and then lock herself in the General’s Quarters.

Technically, she wasn’t locked in. The door had no lock. But just standing outside the door, you could sense her mind working. If Thor was very quiet, he could stand with his ear against the door and listen to her hurried mutters.

Tyr had gone in to bring her food and Thor was disturbed by the fact that she wasn’t eating. Sif had been in to speak with her, but had been promptly turned away. Apparently Darcy needed to ‘think’.

Thor was worried for his brother, but he was beginning to think that perhaps he ought to be more concerned.
Loki had been so sick as a child; Thor remembered vividly fearing his brother’s death at one point. But he’d endured. Even though Loki had been smaller and weaker, there was something in him that refused to break. When they fought so hard that Darcy claimed they were trying to kill each other, bodies beat and bloody, Loki could always keep fighting.

It was odd to think that Loki could die and even stranger to think that he was dying.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Sif stretching out her leather clad legs in the grass, sighing heavily. She cast a weary glance at him, “Do you think they worry for us?”

“Who?” Thor asked, bringing his attention to the present moment.

Sif crossed her ankles, sitting back on her elbows. “The Allmother, Sigyn, the tavern keeps… Asgard.”

“Of course.” Thor answered immediately, “How could they not?”

“That’s not what I meant…” Sif trailed off thoughtfully.

Thor smiled, clapping her on the shoulder, “Well, perhaps I spoke wrong. Sigyn no doubt prayed for my death.”

Sif chuckled, “She has more care for you than that.”

“Mayhap.” He sighed. Distractedly, he glanced in the direction of the bunker.

His friend acknowledged his show of anxiety, frowning at the ground. “You ought to go speak with her.”

Thor raised his brows in surprise, “Truly?”

Sif met his gaze seriously, “Something has gone amiss…I can tell. She needs rest. You are Loki’s brother and her authority.”

Snorting, Thor shook his head, “Sif, Darcy will not abide by my order.”

“Then help her.” Sif insisted, “She is our friend.”

Thor’s protest sat on the tip of his tongue when he began to consider Sif’s words. He’d never truly considered Darcy his friend. She was Loki’s friend and Loki’s Advisor and occasionally she made suggestions that he ought to do something. But he couldn’t deny that he felt protective of her. Not necessarily in the ways of friendship, but rather that of how he felt towards Loki.

Darcy was his sister. Perhaps not by blood, but the occasional annoyance brought on by her presence, the assurance he felt at her safety and concern for her wellbeing…

“You are right.” Thor admitted, getting to his feet. “I will see her.”

Sif nodded up at him before directing her attention to The Pit, “Good.”

Smirking at her response, Thor headed towards Darcy’s study. Before he went to her, he stopped by one of the cellars that did not hold Bjarte, and retrieved two large bottles of wine. He’d prefer Asgardian mead, but the men had drunk the last of it a few nights past.

He didn’t knock before entering Darcy’s chambers, figuring that she might turn him away before he had the opportunity to speak with her.
What he saw upon his entrance was almost enough to make him drop the wine.

Darcy had transformed the room. Loki lie still in the center of the room, face to the heavens, skin pale and dead. The desk was piled high with empty glass bottles, many of them emitting the familiar smells of a healer’s herbs. The floors were scattered with discarded papers, dried grass and pieces of armor.

Beside Loki’s table was the chair and atop the chair stood Darcy. In her hand was the arrow that had poisoned his brother.

To be quite honest, the little lady looked ill. Her hair was messily tied back with a strip of leather, dark circles consumed her eyes, and her hands trembled before her. Most of her armor had been discarded and she wore only a dark purple tunic and her leather pants. The tunic was torn in several places and the entirety of one sleeve was missing, revealing a bloody bandage wrapped securely around her upper arm.

Circling nervously around the legs of her chair were her pets, both of them looking to him pleadingly.

“Darcy?” Thor asked, stepping into the room and allowing the door to shut behind him.

Her gaze flicked to him momentarily before aligning back on the arrow, “S’up?”

His brows knit together at her language, not quite understanding her slurs. “Darcy?”

Her lips turned into an irritated frown, “What is it?”

Slowly, he approached the chair, pleased that the wolf and snake parted ways for him to get closer to their masters. “Are you…are you well?”

She sighed heavily, her breath wafting to Thor’s face. He cringed at the acrid smell of an empty stomach. “I’m failing miserably.” She admitted.

Setting the wine bottles down on the floor, Thor reached up to try to take the arrow from Darcy. He expected some kind of fight, but surprisingly, she let him take the weapon and set it on her desk in front of a bottle that emitted a foul, yet familiar stench. It was sorely reminiscent of Eir’s healing herbs. Though there was something off, a slight imbalance that caused the smell to go from pleasant aroma to retched odor.

“Don’t touch those,” Darcy snapped, immediately coming down from her chair to weakly smack his hands away from her experiments.

“How do you not know?” Thor countered quickly, irritated by her lack of communication. What did she expect him to do? “What does any of this mean to you?”

She brought her fist down on the table with a weak bang, tension rising in her curvaceous form.

“Because it doesn’t make sense!” she yelled, kicking the desk and turning to Loki. “He’s dying. I can feel him dying. He got hit with this arrow. The material is toxic to Asgardians, but…”
Thor waited for her to finish, tentatively putting a hand on her shoulder. “Darcy…”

She shook her head, rubbing her eyes tiredly. “I’m going crazy.”

“You need rest.” Thor said supportively, “And a drink perhaps.”

She gave a grim little smile, scratching the back of her neck. “I might say yes to that. Did you bring in wine?”

Chuckling, Thor went to retrieve the bottles and handed her one. “There are no glasses.”

She rolled her eyes, uncorking the bottle with her teeth before taking a hefty gulp. In any other situation, Thor might have taken the wine from Darcy. He’d learned a while ago that Darcy should not drink past her limit and that her limit was quite easily reached. He’d only ever seen her drink ale once on a rare night when she decided to go into the city with himself, Fandrall, Volstagg, and Hogun.

Darcy’s evening had ended early with Sif carrying her back to the palace while she sang a strange ballad about ‘bringing sexy back’. It was quite entertaining if not extremely forward.

It didn’t seem likely that she was going to start singing anytime soon.

When her bottle was half empty, Darcy ceased drinking momentarily to breathe before gulping down the rest.

Thor pressed his lips together, contemplating whether he should make her vomit. Tyr said she hadn’t been eating and gods knew Thor was familiar with too much drink on an empty stomach.

But given how unwell she appeared, Thor thought it best to let her hurt tomorrow. The wine would help her sleep later on.

For now, Darcy belched, setting down her bottle as she went around the room, hazardously picking up her notes.

“It doesn’t make sense…” she repeated, reading over one of the pages. She stumbled back to her desk as the wine worked its own breed of magic. “The material is toxic to Asguardians, but…”

Thor took the notes from her trembling hands, setting them beside the arrow. “But…?”

Darcy sighed, leaning into his chest, setting her ear over his heart as she embraced him. Her skin was boiling hot, the bandaged part of her arm radiating a feverish heat. “But Loki is cold…really…really cold.”

Clearly there was something Darcy saw in Loki’s state that Thor didn’t, for not a moment after she speak did she press her face into his shirt and begin to cry.

It troubled Thor deeply to see Darcy, a fun-loving and excitable, yet poised and confident lady, brought to tears. He wrapped his arms around her, securing the girl in his embrace, attempting to comfort her.

Thor could hardly remember the last time he’d held anyone like he did Darcy while she cried. Had he ever? Sobs racked her body, her shoulders shaking with every tearful breath. She seemed to be speaking, blathering weepy words into his chest.

“I can’t do it.” She choked between sobs, her red, tear dampened face turned downwards as she
wiped the salty droplets from her cheeks. “I can’t do it. I can’t save him. He’s going to die and it’ll all be my fault because I couldn’t do it…”

Thor set his hands on her shoulders, praying that the gods would give him the proper words to say. Her sorrow pained him in ways he hadn’t felt since Loki was dying as a child. He was helpless. He had not the knowledge to assist her. His strength was not enough to save him and it was all he could do to stop the watery tears from welling in her eyes.

“Do my ears deceive me?” he asked giving her a slight shake, “Is this the same Advisor Darcy who stood by my brother, the Trickster, through his very worst?”

Another sob racked her body and she shook her head at the ground, swaying drunkenly in place.

“Face me, Darcy.” He ordered with a sure, gentle tone.

It took her a moment, but sure enough, she lifted her large dilated blue eyes to meet his.

Gently, he placed his hand on the back of her neck, determined. If anyone could help Loki, it was her. “You can cure him. I am sure of it.”

Her bottom lip trembled as she stared up at him, her gaze unwavering. “How?”

Thor wiped her tears with the palm of his hand, her cheek soft under the roughness of his hand. “Not to worry, Sister. I have a plan.”

Mind muddled by drink and sadness, Darcy gazed up at him with the slightest spark of hope. “You do?”

He nodded reassuringly, hoping to hide the fact that he didn’t even have the beginnings of a plan. But he would promise Darcy Asgard to exile the tears in her eyes.

“Yes.” He said, glancing briefly at Loki’s limp body awash with a sense of hopelessness. “But first you must sleep.”

She shook her head vigorously, panic spreading across her flushed face, “No. There’s no time.”

Pulling away from him, she made to break free of his grasp, but he held on.


Begrudgingly, he released her only for her to stumble backwards, landing on her face on a mass of scattered papers. He went to help her, but she was already clambering to her feet, determined.

Suddenly, he was struck with an idea. It wasn’t a plan exactly, but Darcy could only stay awake and cognate for so long before she slept.

“Darcy,” he called her attention before she could make her way back to Loki, “Are you ready to hear the plan?”

“Yes.” She answered immediately, stepping clumsily towards him. “What is it?”

Replacing his hands on her shoulders, he cast her wound a weary look. “Have you spoken with Lord Bjarte yet?”

She scowled, a hiss escaping from her teeth. “No.”
“Then we will go now.” Thor encouraged, needing to get her out of this room and maybe get Tyr or Sif to look at her arm.

Much to his disappointment, Darcy was displeased by the idea of leaving her chambers.

“I can’t.” she said, shoving weakly at his chest. “I can’t, Thor.”

“Darcy—“

“I can’t!” she screamed, swinging her fists at him the best she could while he held her shoulders. “Don’t you see?”

Thor most definitely did not see. He was at a complete and utter loss.

Darcy began to ramble, her voice high pitched and on the verge of crying. “Bjarte is crazy. He is. I can’t talk to him. He won’t help. He’ll confuse me…or…or….”

Before the tears started Thor gave her a gentle shake, interrupting her drunken slurs. “What if he has the answers? What if you tricked it out of him?”

“I’m not the Trickster.” Darcy sniffed, gazing weakly over her shoulder at Loki. “I play fair.”

“You would play fair when Bjarte cheats you?” Thor asked, feeling as though the gods guided his tongue, for he knew not the words he said.

Darcy’s brow crinkled at them, staring down at the golden arrow.

“Is he cheating me?” she whispered to herself. “Is there really a trick?” she asked, picking up the weapon and looking timidly back at Loki. “No…no…it can’t…”

“Darcy—“

“Let’s go.” She said abruptly, storming out the door faster than Thor could comprehend, the arrow gripped tightly in her hand.

Thor followed her down the hall, reaching to help her and retreating when she pointed the arrow at him in a threat. “Don’t touch me. This will kill you. If you get too close, I could fall and hurt you.”

Very carefully, Thor reached for the arrow. “I understand. But Darcy, it could kill you as well. You are drunk.”

She chuckled, turning away from him and swaying as she approached the door to the cellar Bjarte was being kept. “I’m not a prince. I’m worth less to Asgard than anyone could know.”

She left him standing there in a state of befuddlement. He’d no idea that Darcy thought so lowly of herself. But it did not seem to bother her in the slightest as she descended into the depths of the cellar, yelling Bjarte’s name at the top of her lungs.

“Darcy!” Thor hollered, grabbing a torch from the wall and chasing her down the steps.

She wasn’t very fast which was unsurprising seeing as how she was drunk, injured and carrying an apparently lethal weapon. Even so, she made an entrance, crashing into the wall and steadying herself on one of the large wine barrels.

Thor cringed at the foul aroma of unwashed skin and waste while the smell of overripe wine wafted through the stench as a nullifying undertone. He held the torch higher to see the effects of
imprisonment upon the High Lord.

It suited him ill. His infamous beard was overgrown and tangled with dirt, his feet were bare and his golden armor sat in a sad heap in the corner of his cage. Sitting beside him on the cold ground was a small mouse, gnawing on the remnants of a bone from their supper of wild oxen that evening.

He paid no attention to Thor, his golden-eyed gaze focused entirely on Darcy’s trembling figure.

“Advisor Darcy,” he crooned almost melodically from his cell, getting to his feet steadily enough, “I was wondering when you were going to visit me.”

“Shut up.” She demanded, shambling to the bars of his cage, the arrowhead narrowly missing her skin a dozen times before her body collided with the cell.

Bjarte chortled to himself as Darcy panted, holding herself up against the bars. “Oh come now, Advisor, I thought you wittier than this; brought to your weakest by a mere mystery. If only I had known sooner your greatest shortcoming.”

“Curiosity isn’t a weakness.” Darcy told him shrewdly, “A foible, most definitely. And I’ve got you pinned, you fucking turd.” She held up the arrow, “What did you put on this? What poison?!”

Bjarte stayed a fair distance away from Darcy, hands folded neatly behind his back. “You don’t know?” he asked mockingly, “I expected better.”

“He’s dying you heartless son of a bitch!” Darcy spat, slumping against the bars, giving them a shake with more muscle than Thor knew she had. “He’s dying!”

“Oh I know that,” Bjarte hummed idly, “Why not save him?”

Thor would have stepped forward, but he found himself immobile, feet planted solidly to the ground as he watched the thrilling interaction between the High Lord and Advisor.

Tears streaked Darcy’s cheeks as sweat dewed her hairline. She looked ready to collapse. “Don’t mock me.”

“I do not mock,” Bjarte sneered advancing on the girl like a caged predator, “I have but a simple question.”

Darcy trembled, not in fear, but rather excitement. “Ask it.”

Bjarte smirked knowingly, “How long do you think it will be before his heart goes cold?”

Silence overcame the cellar and the torch in Thor’s hand seemed to dim ever so slightly.

Darcy’s hushed voice broke the quiet, answering Bjarte’s question with a heartbreaking crack. “Five days. Maybe less.”

Her head bowed as she drunkenly wept for Loki and Bjarte leered callously at her from behind his bars, “You would cry for a monster?”

“A monster?” Darcy muttered, rubbing her eyes.

Yes, a mon—“

Darcy’s head snapped up and she quickly backed away from the cage, arrow raised in threat. Her
blue eyes gleamed with the brightening spark of a drunken epiphany.

This look broke Thor from his frozen stance and he stepped forwards to take her to Tyr or someone who could help her. She was unwell.

“A monster.” She shook her head, belting out a weak laugh, “I must be out of my god damned mind. Hasta la vista, you weird-bearded motherfucker.”

Thor didn’t have time to process the language she spoke before she was charging up the stairs in her drunken stupor. Thor followed close behind, steadying her whenever she threatened to stumble backwards.

They reached the main level of the bunker and she slammed the cellar door shut, locking it with terrifying urgency. Frantically, she looked up at him, eyes slightly out of focus, her face beaded with perspiration.

“Take me to Kitan.” Darcy demanded, somehow managing to articulate her words well enough.

Thor cocked her head at her, dumbfounded. “Darcy, what?”

“Kitan.” Darcy repeated, gripping her arm as she ambling to the bunker exit. “Now. I need you to fly me there with Mjolnir.”

Thor clenched his jaw, shaking his head in disapproval. “Darcy, you need sleep and a healer.”

She stomped her foot, growling in frustration. “Do you want Loki to die?!!”

“Of course not!” Thor snapped defensively.

“Then get me to Kitan, or so help me…” Darcy said menacingly, blood wetting her fingers as they clenched her bandage.

Relenting, Thor lead her out of the bunker, summoning Mjolnir. He held out his hand, waiting while Darcy swayed nauseously. “Darcy--?”

“I’m fine.” She assured as Mjolnir met his palm. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

He gathered the girl into his side, spinning his hammer above his head until they ascended into the night sky.

***

Darcy’s mind felt like it was burning. Every cell set aflame, burning her nerves, the smoke clouding her judgment. Through the haze, she saw her answer.

It was so painfully clear to her why Bjarte hated Loki. It all made sense why he hadn’t just killed her prince. Loki was…

She laughed to herself as Thor descended from the heavens into the middle of Kitan. Nausea racked through Darcy’s stomach and she clutched a hand over her mouth, swallowing down her vomit. Sickness would come later; right now, she had a job to do.

“Thor…” she trailed off, halting her statement to burp and steady herself on his arm, “We need Dekid.”

The blonde Prince frowned down at her, “Who?”
“Dekid!” she repeated, her vision blurring as she tried to focus on him. She was three seconds away from either dying of alcohol poisoning or saving Loki’s frozen ass. Maybe both.

“Darcy, I—”

“The apothecary!” she clarified, stumbling toward a short wooden building. She had to find Dekid. He’d helped out the Asgardians before, offering them medical herbs and ointments. Now she required something a little more toxic to the typical Asgardian.

Strong hands grabbed her shoulders, neatly avoiding the cut on her arm which, with the copious amount of alcohol in her system, barely pained her.

“Darcy,” Thor said her name slowly, though it took her several long seconds to process. “Dekid’s shop is that way.” He reminded her, pointing down the cobbled street to the blurry darkness which drink and poor eyesight blinded Darcy from seeing.

Drunk, frustrated, and teetering on the edge of insanity, Darcy charged in the direction Thor gestured to. She stumbled multiple times on her way and fell when Thor failed to catch her. When she reached the door, the thought of knocking passed through her mind before quickly being overturned by the urgency of her situation.

Without warning, she snatched Mjolnir from Thor’s grasp, hurdling it and herself against the door before Thor could even begin to protest.

Her efforts were not in vain, however detrimental they were to her physical health. The impact with the door hurt her already injured arm something awful, as well as thrashing around her head. As if drunkenness wasn’t enough, she now felt like her brains were going through a cement mixer.

The door latch broke and Darcy tumbled into Dekid’s abode, Mjolnir thudding to the ground in her wake. Thor shouted something angrily in Allspeak as an angry and bewildered Dekid, still clad in his day’s work clothes, entered the storefront wielding a heavy looking axe.

Gray hair disheveled and axe at the ready, Dekid roared out a series of threats that Darcy managed not to comprehend.

Thor began to answer, but Darcy figured she ought to say something. This was her doing, afterall.

“Dekid…” she addressed the apothecary, fighting her eyes to remain steady on him. “I need a favor.”

The man looked to Thor for an explanation, clearly trying to make sense of her, “What do you want? I helped you all I could. I haven’t gone for new ingredients yet. I—“

“Shh,” Darcy interrupted, carefully stepping closer to Dekid until she could smell the faint traces of magic on his skin. He could make what she needed to cure Loki.

Dekid blinked down at her, clearly unsure of what to do. He wasn’t a particularly strong looking man, but he could take down Darcy, no trouble. “Lady—“

“I need a potion.” Darcy told him, her intemperate tongue morphing her statement into some seemingly incomprehensible gibberish. It took her several long seconds and a number of her few functioning brain cells to realize that she was speaking English, and unless the Vanir had Asgardian heritage, he couldn’t inherently use Allspeak and therefore had no idea what she was saying.
She corrected her mistake, reverting to Allspeak. “I need a potion.”

Dekid frowned, scrutinizing her face skeptically. “What kind of potion?”

“Bani Mannsins,” Darcy replied, gaze flicking to the back of his shop where she knew he had the proper ingredients to concoct Loki’s cure.

Thor cocked his head, blonde brows crinkling his pretty forehead.

“The Bane of Man?” he clarified. “That’s not a potion; it’s poison.”

“I need a full vial.” Darcy instructed Dekid. When the apothecary opened his mouth to protest, Darcy stumbled forwards, choking down her vomit on the way.

“Lady—“

“I’ll pay you.” Darcy insisted, grabbing his tunic to keep from falling to her knees. “Handsomely. But I need this potion.”

Perspiration dampened Dekid’s brow and he looked…almost intimidated. Darcy couldn’t be too sure; she was too focused on not passing out.

“You want poison?” Dekid asked shakily, hands grasping at his shirt sleeves nervously.

“Yes.” Darcy answered in that one, consenting syllable that usually had men rushing to go brew up a special little concoction for the lady. Dekid didn’t seem to be quite so eager. As a matter of fact, neither did Thor.

“Darcy, you can’t kill Bjarte.” Thor said, grabbing her injured arm to pull her away from the apothecary.

An involuntary scream of pain ripped through Darcy’s throat at the contact and Thor released her immediately. She caught herself on the edge of the shop’s counter, panting and shaking, trying to get a grip on herself.

Sweat dripped into Darcy’s near useless eyes as the pain subsided. She might have been facing mild cognitive impairment and slight manipulation from a psychotic weirdo with a beard, but she was still well enough to know that she wasn’t going to make it more than a week without some serious medical attention.

And she wasn’t going to get that attention unless she cured Loki.

And Loki’s cure just happened to be—

“Poison, Darcy?” Thor reasoned, “You are not in your right mind. That is dishonorable in every regard and as Prince of Asgard—“

“It’s not for Bjarte.” She breathed, clenching her arm and biting her tongue as hot, infected blood seeped from the wound. A chill crawled across her skin, creeping down her spine like a diseased shadow and leaving feverish sweat in its wake. Forcing her eyes open, Darcy glared up at Dekid with every ounce of energy in her body. “Make me the poison.”

Dekid glanced to Thor helplessly before letting his gaze flicker back to Darcy. “Please, I do not wish for anyone to be hurt.”

Darcy gave him a small, bitter smile. “If I’m wrong about this, Dekid, believe me, no one is going
to be hurting as much as me. But I need that potion.”

The apothecary ground his teeth, skittishly shifting his gaze back and forth between Darcy and Thor.

At long last, he gave in.

“You needn’t pay me anything, so long as no one knows where this poison came from. I don’t want anything to do with it.” He demanded sternly, eyes locked on Thor’s seeing as how Darcy’s were closed.

The blonde prince nodded briefly, “You have my word.”

The poison was brewed in a matter of minutes, given the right enchantments and ingredients. All were things easy to come by on any given realm depending on the region. A main component of the blend was mistletoe.

While the plant didn’t harm Asgardians on contact, if ingested with a healthy supplement of toxins and ill conceived magical energy, it was lethal.

Dekid corked the tube and placed it in Darcy’s trembling hands. The liquid was a thick, milky white and fairly cool to the touch. It wasn’t a prime solution. An Asgardian brew would be thinner, less opaque, and just touching the vial would lower Darcy’s overall body temperature by point two degrees.

Unfortunately, this was the best she had and there was no way she was taking the risk on getting anything better.

The trip back to camp was excruciating in more ways than one.

Physically, Darcy was suffering for the obvious reasons.

But mentally…therein lay the true agony.

For when she and Thor returned to the bunker and ultimately to Loki’s bedside, the solution that Darcy had been so sure of not an hour before during her rough interrogation with Bjarte seemed absurd.

Her hypothesis was no more than a few straggling theories strung together by a prolific number of assumptions.

If Loki drinks the poison and he dies immediately, then he’s an Asgardian because he was born that way.

But…

If Loki is not Asgardian and he drinks the poison, then…what?

It all depends doesn’t it? If he’s an elf, he gets sick. If he’s Vanir, he dies. Same goes for Humans, Dwarves, definitely Fire Giants…

But there was one exception to the poison.

The Jotunar. For them, it acted as an antidote, a neutralizer to any toxin.

Her head spun as she stared down at her friend. Her love. Without a cure, he was dead. With the
wrong cure, he was also dead.

God, she should be on one of those hospital dramas. Darcy Lewis, cryptic, ailing doctor madly in love with her comatose patient. One wrong move and—

Darcy’s thoughts were cut short by a revolting twist in her stomach, nausea pulling at her gut. Again she tried to swallow the vomit, but found she was unable to. She choked, hacking and coughing a sick combination of wine and bile on the dirty ground.

When her breathing returned, Thor was holding her up, pressing the rim of a cup to her lips. Obediently, she tried to drink, but choked almost immediately.

“Stop.” Darcy croaked, leaning heavily on Loki’s table, her sweaty, feverish head resting on his frozen shoulder. Frank and Fenrir whined from the ground, but Darcy could barely hear them. She was making her decision.

The alcohol had done its job. It gave her enough gumption to come up with a solution, something she’d been unable to do before. Now all she needed was the motivation to come to a conclusion. The final push.

Gripping the vial of poison, Darcy too a trembling step toward Loki. He was blurry, pale skin glowing against a void of black hair. His typically pink lips were ashen, though offset enough in color to tell Darcy where to drain the contents of her bottle.

She uncorked the container with her teeth, grunting with the effort it took to clench her jaw and cringing at the volume of Thor’s voice echoing in her ears.

“Darcy!” he shouted, pulling her away from Loki.

She struggled, but every push against his bulging arms felt distant. Even his voice, which was spewing nonsense in her ear about dangers and intoxications sounded as though she were underwater and Thor was trying to communicate from the surface.

“You will kill him!” Thor yelled and Darcy realized that she was screaming.

It was nothing coherent; there were no words coming out of her mouth.

Before she knew it, she was falling in the ever inevitable collapse. This time, Thor wasn’t there to catch her. Instead, he lay next to her on the ground, eyes closed with Frank and Fenrir perched nobly atop his chest.

Darcy didn’t take the time to thank them, dizzily dragging herself to her feet. She pulled herself up to the table, the vial still in her hand and holding enough poison to cure him. Maybe.

“Loki…”Darcy breathed, blinking away the tears in her eyes, “I’m so sorry.” She sniffed, grabbing his hand and painfully tilting her head to kiss his cheek. “And I love you.”

At long last, Darcy’s heart gave her the final push. Perhaps it was the adrenaline, or the fact that her heart fluttered like a dying hummingbird colony in her chest…maybe it was just true love.

It didn’t matter, because he drank it and Darcy had just enough time to hear his heart stutter before hers stopped completely.

***
Bjarte could feel the shift in the air when the damned Prince Loki awoke.

It was like lighting a torch in a dark cave. An entire terrain void of magic until that little, frozen brat shows up and illuminates the entire spectrum.

But at the very same time as that light came on, he felt the little shadow die.

Oh, yes.

Lady Darcy.

A shadow would be nothing without the light.

Of course, even the toughest of shadows could not go on without a sun to sustain them. The monster would protect his faithful little pet.

For the first time since he arrived on Vanaheim, the High Lord considered failure as an outcome of his ploy.

If Advisor Darcy, that obnoxious little chit, cured him without divulging her knowledge to the rest of the camp or even her closer attendants, then Loki’s identity could remain a secret.

To be honest with himself, Bjarte underestimated the Prince. He managed to cure himself of some of the harsher, more abrasive effects of the poison before losing consciousness. Bjarte suspected that the young prince’s skin had not turned blue, lest an outrage had occurred without his knowledge.

Yes, there was a possibility, larger now than before, that his plan had failed. The secret remained in the reticent hands of Frigga and her adverse lackey, Advisor Darcy.

With Loki revived, no doubt Darcy could retrieve magical and verbal evidence of his misdemeanors and have him imprisoned. Asgard’s dungeons were not uncomfortable, so he heard. However secluded, he would no doubt be able to prosper.

All he had left to do was wait for his retribution.

And wait he did. For how long, he was unsure. Time passed differently in isolation. Mere minutes could be days and an hour was a month when the rats came to visit.

The wait was shorter than he anticipated, perhaps only a day when his confinement was interrupted by two unlikely visitors.

The Lady Sif and the so-called ‘dashing’ Fandrall entered the cellar in complete darkness. Neither carried a torch to illuminate their expressionless faces. They watched him eerily and Bjarte smirked. Perhaps they feared him. If Loki had deduced the truth from his former cheiftan thralls, no doubt they had reason to be scared of him.

He was superior.

“I was expecting visitors before too long.” Bjarte said, leering at them from behind bars. “Is it time to go already? Back to Asgard where you can put me in a proper cell?”

He expected some verbose negation, laden with bragging and warrior’s giddiness at having defeated the evil. He hoped for a lecture on all of the cruel things the Asgardian justice system would permit them to do. He wanted to confute with them over how much pain he was going to
endure for hurting their friends. He wanted to know just how much pain little Advisor Darcy had suffered through.

Alas, they did not speak to him. Instead, Sif approached his cage and unlocked the gate. None too gently, she and Fandrall reached for him, pinning his hands behind his back and tying a strip of bloody cloth over his eyes. They pulled him from the cell, pushing and pulling him up the stairs. He tripped several times, his muscles unaccustomed to movement after days of dormant pacing.

When he tasted the fresh air of the outdoors and felt the light summer breeze upon his skin, he dared a question, “Where are you taking me?”

He received no response.

The sun was bright in the sky and he was glad for his blindfold. Without it, his eyes would be aching from the light. Still, it worried him. Where could they possibly be bringing a war criminal in the light of day? To kill him? An execution? It was illegal by Asgardian law. They would be punished severely.

“You have no authority to be taking me anywhere.” Bjarte reminded them as his feet met with the soft, muddy earth of the forest and the shade of the trees offered his skin reprieve from the sun’s obnoxious heat.

Again, his sentries remained silent, pushing him on.

When the air around them cooled even more and even the light that trickled through the cloth of his blind had been put out, Bjarte’s concern deepened.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked, attempting to yank his arms free. They could not kill him. It was his job to evade the law and it was the responsibility of others to keep the rules. If none listen to the rules, then there are no rules to be broken.

“High Lord Bjarte,” announced a familiar, distinct voice.

He smirked at the sound, greeting the wench with disdain. “Advisor Darcy,” he said, throat dry, “You must be feeling better. How is your beloved prince?”

A second passed before she continued speaking, though not directly to him. He desperately wished for the blindfold to be removed as fear became a more prominent factor in his immediate worries.

“As an agreement between the Asgardians and the infamous clan of Meiri, High Lord Bjarte has been condemned to time with the women of said tribe.” She stated clearly, as if speaking to a crowd. Perhaps she was. Bjarte couldn’t tell, everything was just so dark.

“The Meiri?” he whispered to himself, the cold hand of fear clasping its clammy fingers around his heart. “No….”

“As part of this agreement, The Meiri will return Bjarte to this place at sundown. He must be alive and able to defend himself in an Asgardian court.” Darcy finished plainly, and Bjarte could almost see her in his head, folding her arms, her chin lifted proudly.

“You bitch!” Bjarte shouted, jerking his body any which way he could to break his restraints. “They’ll kill me! I’ll be dead!”

He tugged harder and finally Sif and Fandrall let go. He pulled off his blindfold, searching around nervously for his guards and Darcy, but they were not there. Rather, he stood in the heart of a black
void, a vacuum of all color and light.

“Where are you, little Advisor?” Bjarte taunted, irked by the impossible silence that surrounded him. “Is your monster still breathing? Or has he died because of your astonishing ineptitude? Your incapability to—“

He was cut off by a very sudden change in the air. Hands found his shoulders, his hands, his eyes, his legs... The hands didn’t stop until he was completely compromised.

A heavily accented woman's voice spoke in his ear, low and threatening, “Prepare for your punishment, man. You will think before you disrupt our land again.”

Those were the last words Bjarte would hear until nightfall and the threat that would haunt his memories for the rest of his years.

***

Loki finished tying the string that held his letter to a raven’s outstretched foot. The elegant blackbird was perched patiently on his arm, waiting to receive his instruction on where to deliver the message.

“To Chief Gohun and his son, Bal.” Loki instructed, smirking at the scroll. It was his personal thanks to Gohun for his assistance and cooperation in helping Darcy while he was indisposed. After hearing Darcy’s tale about all that had occurred, Loki also thought it would be fitting to thank the child for his bravery.

The raven echoed his statement, extending its great black wings and soaring off into the mid-morning breeze.

They were returning to Asgard soon.

Loki was rather proud of the impact her had on Asgard’s success, though he had little hope that his efforts would be widely recognized.

After Darcy had cured him, he was then forced to put all his energy into restoring her to her full health. The injury she’d sustained during battle combined with the overindulgence and abuse of alcohol had left his beloved poisoned, infected, and maimed. His anger was breathtaking, yet he managed to fix her nonetheless.

When she awoke, she told him of all that had happened and that which she needed him to do for them to return home.

Loki complied without her even having to ask, joining her to visit the tribes and relieve them of their magical bond to Bjarte. They confirmed that he was indeed culpable and Thor assured Heimdall that their traitor had been found.

A representative from the capital came to Vanaheim to assure them that they would be able to return the following morning.

That afternoon, Darcy sent Bjarte out for a visit with the Meiri and they returned him almost in one piece. He happened to be missing a rather important part of his anatomy, along with any clothes that they’d sent him in with. Loki then made a vow that he would not cross the Meiri so long as he lived, for he valued his manhood.

Giving the horizon one last look, Loki descended into the bunker and into Darcy’s study.
His lady, refreshed and rejuvenated by his magic and a long bath in Takara, stood by the table where he had once slept. She stacked papers and organized notes, Jormungandr and Fenrir happily playing on the ground by her feet.

Loki had conjured her lighter clothes. A simple dress and that was cool enough to walk in and would not burden her resting body.

Warmth spread through his chest when she shot him a grin over her shoulder. “Hey there, Sleeping Beauty.”

He rolled his eyes as she went back to her work.

“How are you feeling?” He asked, approaching her table and settling a hand on the healthy curve of her hip.

“Hm,” she hummed thoughtfully, packing away the rest of her things and setting the bag aside, “Very true. Sleeping Beauty also got poked with a needle, not an arrow. So, I guess you win.”

Chuckling, Loki gathered her into a hug from behind, burying his face in the exposed crook of her neck and inhaling her scent. She smelled quite strongly of the outdoors and or earthen minerals, but there was still that telltale, underlying smell that was her.

She relaxed into his embrace, turning in his arms so her eyes could search his face, bright blue orbs swimming with wonder.

“You're staring.” He stated obviously, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“You look funny.” Darcy explained cheerily, “I can't help it.”

“And yet you dub my Sleeping Beauty.” He sighed sadly, “A cruel joke.”

“More like irony.” She pointed out, stretching her arms and cracking her back.

Soothingly, he rubbed the back of his fingers down her spine, reveling in the truth of the moment. They were together, eyes closed, relishing in the calm after the storm. They survived. But Loki was still curious on the ‘how’.

How had Darcy cured him?

It seemed like a simple enough question. He had healed himself to some brief extent before he lost consciousness. Though he couldn’t remember what he’d done; the magic had come almost instinctively to counteract the toxin. But Darcy…a mortal…what had she used to cure him?

Loki asked Thor, though, after being roughly disengaged by Jormungandr and Fenrir, he had no recollection of the night prior. Loki wished he were joking; he wasn’t.

But, oddly enough, Darcy had been rather quiet about healing him. He could tell it was intentional, but anytime in the past few days that he’d brought up his past ailment, she quickly prevaricated.

“Darcy,” Loki spoke her name lowly, approaching his question with more delicacy than one would think he needed.

She hummed in response, resting her head against his chest.

“What did you use to cure me?”
She was silent for a considerable amount of time; far too long to recall an event. But he waited. If Darcy was having trouble telling him the truth, then there was more to the story than he originally believed.

At last, she looked up at him, eyes wide and brow knit. “I can’t remember.”

Loki’s jaw clenched. Darcy was an awful liar.

She swallowed thickly, taking his hands as she averted her gaze. “I was drunk. An argument could be made that I was dying. I don’t remember exactly what it was and I don’t know why… I—I…”

Ever so gently, Loki lifted her chin, looking down into her glassy blue eyes. Whatever she was lying about, it upset her and although he was extremely curious, he would wait for his answers. They would come in time.

“Hush, Darling.” Loki soothed, kissing the top of her head, “‘Think not of it, sweet one, so.’”

She sniffed, offering him a small smile. “John Keats?”

“I’m feeling romantic.”

At this she laughed, reaching up to hold his face in her hands, her fingertips caressing his cheeks. “I shouldn’t laugh. That was an awful pun.”

Loki gave her a playful grin, “I am the God of Mischief. What does that entail if not foolhardy puns?”

“Relentless pranks and mad kissing skills.” She replied, standing on her toes to peck his lips.

Loki agreed very much with those things and because they had some time before it was time to leave, he held Darcy closer, deepening the kiss.

There were things that Loki hadn’t known about Darcy until kissing her. It was amusing to him how he’d practically lived with Darcy for years now and he hadn’t known certain things.

Like how soft she was with her kisses. Or how she tasted. All the passion she could annunciate in a council meeting was amplified by thousands just in the way she pressed herself closer to him, unabashedly seeking out more of him.

Loki indulged in her kiss. Every move was deliberate, every kiss a study to find out if every touch could truly be more perfect than the last. He wanted to know if that small, involuntary sound a few seconds ago had anything to do with the fact that he’d chosen that moment to take her bottom lip between his teeth.

He pulled away with a slight gasp, annoyed with the sheer amount of effort it took not to kiss her. Darcy pouted at their separation, her cheeks and lips bright, rosy pink.

“We stopped.” She said obviously, “Why?”

“I wanted to see the look on your face.” He teased, smirking down at her, relishing in the annoyed little quirk in her lips.

“Hardy-hur-hur.” She said, rolling her eyes and giving him a shove. “I take it back, your kissing skills aren’t that great.”

He caught her wrists before she could push him away, “You wound me, Darling.”
She cocked a brow, standing on her toes again. “You could make it up to me.”

“I could?” Loki asked, taking a hint, as the Midgardians say. He leaned in closer, reaching down to lift her onto the table so they were the same height and he stood between her legs.

“Oh yeah.” Darcy assured, threading her fingers in his hair. “Got any ideas?”

He chuckled, tilting his head to kiss her, “I may need a moment to think on it.”

She agreed with a hum of approval as they sunk into another delightful kiss. Heart warm and mind buzzing with the enigmatic charm of Darcy’s sweet kisses, Loki nearly whined like a newborn babe when she pulled away. Only her words were enough to stop him.

“I love you.” She whispered against his lips, “Even if you drive me absolutely bat-shit crazy.”

He smiled, kissing the tip of her nose. “And I, you.”

They started to kiss again when there was a quick knock on the door.

Darcy hopped down from the table in an instant, smoothing back her hair while Loki made sure that his trousers were indeed doing their purpose to hide any of the lingering effects of his and Darcy’s time together.

Tyr entered, his helm under his arm and a rather self-satisfied smirk on his face. “Prince Loki, Advisor Darcy. We are ready.”

Darcy lifted her chin, ineffectively trying to hide her blush. “We’ll be right out.”

Tyr glanced skeptically between the two, absolute delight shining in his eyes. “I see. A matter of great importance?”

Loki adorned a look of innocence, “What else would it be?”

Tyr slapped his hands over his heart, “Oh, look. You’re accepting the truth. My little babies are growing up.”

“They are?” Darcy said warily.

“You’re in love!” He cried, throwing his hands in the air.

Darcy grimaced, crossing her arms. “You were listening at the door, weren’t you?”

The High Lord dabbed a tear away from his eye, “Not long. I just…” he paused to take a deep breath “I can’t handle so much love. I swear to the gods, the next person to declare love to another, I’m going to fall apart. Someone will have to catch all of the pieces and glue them together again with my own tears.”

“And of course, you wouldn’t exaggerate.” Loki played along, humored.

Tyr shook his head, turning to exit the room. “Me? Never.”

As he left, Darcy shouldered her bag and Loki took her hand, kissing her knuckles softly.

“Shall we?” he asked, fitting her hand in the crook of his arm.

“Hell yes.” Darcy said, standing up on her toes to kiss her quickly. “I’m returning to Asgard, eating
an entire roast pheasant, taking a bath with lots of bubbles, and wearing actual pajamas to bed.”

“Anything else?” Loki inquired, thinking of how long it had been since she’d slept in a proper bed.

She tapped her chin thoughtfully, “Yeah. I’m going to change my underwear. Jesus fucking Christ, my first war and I forget a spare change of tighty-whities.”

“If you weren’t so successful in the Asgardian political scene, I would ask if you even think about what you’ve said before you say it.”

Laughing, Darcy pulled him from the bunker, “You know the answer to that one.”

Loki sighed in exasperation, “Indeed I do.”

***

Sigyn rolled over in bed, adamantly ignoring her hand-maidens as they encouraged her to get out of bed.

The truth was, Sigyn had no desire to get out of bed. She needn’t see Baldur until later that evening because he wished to teach her about stars. The more awake she was, the more she had to think about Sif being gone and possibly dying.

“Lady Sigyn!” one of the maids insisted, grabbing her sheet and attempting to rip it away, but Sigyn held on.

There was only one thing that was getting her up and that was—

“The troops are returning today! The Allfather has just gone to the bifrost to welcome the returning troops home!”

Sigyn sat up in an instant, her eyes wide open and her hair sticking up at several odd angles. “What?”

“The warriors are coming home in a matter of minutes and you are not dressed yet, Milady!”

No sooner had the maid said this then Sigyn was out of bed, scrambling to find an article of clothing. She settled with Sif’s leather pants that she’d adopted and a light blue tunic that Baldur had given her. She assumed that it used to be Nanna’s and the thing now held extreme sentimental value to her.

The maids gasped at her choice of clothing.

“My lady, you cannot meet your betrothed wearing that.” One of them insisted.

Sigyn ignored her, going into the washroom, rinsing out her mouth, and running a brush through her hair.

Before the maids could even get their hands on Sigyn she was out of her room, sprinting to the stables.

Gareth awaited her, his white mane blowing elegantly in the wind and he greeted with her with an excited snort. Sigyn mounted his back, her heart racing with anxiety.

Sif was home.
She was home and that was all that mattered.

“To the bifrost!” Sigyn commanded, whipping Gareth’s reins, encouraging her horse to set off towards the bridge.

She’d never ridden so fast, yet no trip had ever seemed longer. By the time she reached the great golden archway to the bifrost, Sigyn could see the hoards of men flooding onto the rainbow bridge. Before them stood the Allfather who looked down upon four kneeling people.

Volstagg, with his red mane and rotund belly, Hogun with his stiff posture and grim demeanor, Fandrall with his flirty grin and blonde moustache…

And lastly was Sif, kneeling before Odin with her fist pressed over her heart, her jaw set with that strong, deep determination that Sigyn was such a sucker for.

It was his voice that stopped Sigyn, for she could not believe his words.

“Your bravery was unparalleled. The leadership and power you presented through has demonstrated to the Nine Realms your strength. Asgard honors your for your strength and would hereby present you with the opportunity to defend Yggdrasil from any threat.”

Odin’s voice radiated to her very core and Sigyn watched in absolute awe as Odin declared Sif a warrior. The top rank.

They spoke their vows and Sigyn had only eyes for her lady as she swore on her life and her ancestors that she would protect Nine Realms from harm. She would be the dividing barrier between peace and chaos.

When Odin bid them to stand, Sigyn found her wits dismounting Gareth and running towards the crowd, her heart filled to the very brim with emotions she hadn’t an inkling how to express.

“Sif!” she cried out as loud as she could to the black haired warrior, “Sif!”

At last, her lady heard the calls of her lover, turning on her booted heel to see Sigyn panting in the middle of the bifrost bridge, hair a mess and the most disheveled she’d ever looked out of bed.

“Sigyn.” Sif breathed, running towards her lady so they met just a short distance away from the Allfather. Everyone’s eyes were upon them, yet Sigyn didn’t have the will to care what they thought any longer.

Her lady was home and she was a warrior.

They could finally be together.

Sif came to a halt just before Sigyn, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Lady Sigyn.”

“Lady Sif.” Sigyn breathed, watching her lover’s face with complete adoration. “You came back in one piece.”

“Almost.” Sif chortled, scratching the back of her neck, her cheeks flushed as she reached into a chink in her armor, removing a Sigyn’s family necklace. “This did as well. Your token, Lady Sigyn.”

Sigyn accepted the necklace and without looking at it, she threw the jewelry over her shoulder and into the water below.
Without another moment’s hesitation, Sigyn grabbed Sif’s shoulders, pulling her into a deep, breathtaking kiss.

Sif responded with unparalleled enthusiasm, breaking away for only a moment to say, “I love you.”

All was silent, save what sounded like sniffles and the familiar voice of Tyr speaking through sobs, “…knew it. Oh gods, spare me. They’re perfect. Made to be.”

Finally, they ended their kiss with a few lingering pecks and a few tears on Sif’s part. The kiss had been so intimate that Sigyn had totally forgotten about the entire army and Odin witnessing her clandestine relationship’s reunion.

It occurred to her only when the king cleared his throat and Sigyn was forced to look him in the eye.

She swallowed her fear. Let him arrest her for disrespecting Thor. Better to be in prison than married to him anyhow, so long as he didn’t hurt Sif or revoke her new title.

“Lady Sigyn.” The Allfather said her name plainly in that bland, expressionless way of his.

“Odin Allfather,” she replied, kneeling and placing a fist over her heart.

The king stood up straighter, squeezing Gungnir in hand. “I take it that this means you have no interest in my son?”

Sigyn bowed her head, “I mean no disrespect your majesty.”

“That does not answer my question, Lady Sigyn.”

She lifted her chin to look her king dead in the eye, “Prince Thor is not meant for me. I see him only as a friend.”

When he said nothing, Sigyn’s heart fell and she continued on speaking, her head held high.

“I would accept any punishment you deem necessary for disgracing your son this way. Let me face whatever I must to absolve Lady Sif as well—“

“Go on.” Odin instructed, a small smile playing on his ancient lips.

“I beg your pardon, Allfather?” Sif gasped as Sigyn got to her feet.

Odin waved his hand, continuing to saunter back towards the palace. “Go on. Thor has given me enough trouble as it is. And…” he trailed off, gaze flicking towards the men then back to the two ladies, “as Tyr has said, you suit one another. You have my blessing.”

Sif and Sigyn didn’t have time to be too surprised by the Allfather’s passiveness, for he continued on without a backwards glance.

Laughing and crying, the ladies kissed again and Asgard’s military applauded, cheering for their happiness.

“Gods, Sif, this is…” Sigyn sighed, a grin all but devouring her face before quickly falling into complete and utter mortification.

Sif’s brow crinkled, “What is it, Sigyn?”
The blonde lady licked her lips anxiously, “What am I going to tell my parents?”

Sif smirked, taking her lady’s hands, “Tell her the truth.”

When Sigyn opened her mouth to protest, Sif continued on.

“Tell her, that you are being courted by one of the most respected warriors in the Nine Realms. A Warrior burdened with the honor of defending Yggdrasil as the king’s guard.”

Sigyn shook her head, smiling through her apprehensiveness. “Should I leave out that you’re a woman?”

She smiled, taking her lady’s hand, “Perhaps.”

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are again. Not quite as long a wait as the last chapter.

I know the end was a little anti-climactic, but perhaps it could be a break from all of the emotional distress. The next chapter will be mostly fluff. And some kisses. And, I suppose, some politics. Maybe a bit of mischief...and...well...Loki. There will be Loki. You've been warned.

Per usual, I have a couple things I want to say about this chapter. Firstly, I've never been to war. I don't know how war works. I'm a dummy without hours of time to research war before writing a monster chapter about feuding clans.

Secondly, I apologize about the length. If this fic were a penis, it's owner would probably buy the super quality condoms. Just keep in mind, quality over quantity. That goes for penises, penis owners, condoms, and fanfiction.

Honestly, I forgot what else I wanted to say. But if I think of it, I'll write it down. If any of you have any questions, ask me and I shall answer.

Thank you all so much for patience and reading and all that jazz. I can't tell you how much it means to me, Thanks guys!
Frank and the Star

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Loki are courting. Sigyn forges things. Frank and Fenrir are themselves. Sex? Sex.

Chapter Notes

Hey! It's me, Q. In case you forgot. I wouldn't blame you seeing as how I magically dropped off the face of the internet world for a while there. Just a quick foreword; this chapter has a strong "M" rating, *wink* I was really happy to write it and I hope you're happy to read it. :)

Love, Q

Darcy lay in Frigga’s quarters, sprawled out on the window seat, staring blankly at the vaulted ceiling above her while Frank coiled sleepily beside her.

The Queen stood before her pool, watching the water, her fingers intertwined tightly behind her back.

It had been a month since their return and Darcy had to admit, things had not been going as smoothly as she initially believed they would be.

Bjarte was found guilty of conspiracy against the crown. He admitted to Lord Solt and the rest of the Asgardian justice system that he had hopes of creating an uprising against Odin through his deeds on Vanaheim. He was sentenced to six-thousand years of imprisonment and, since he was immortal, the years following he would spend in exile on some barren moon just outside Muspelheim.

Darcy had attended his trial as both a witness and a spectator, thinking through the entire trial of the lie beneath his brilliant façade. Loki’s survival was proof of Bjarte’s true incentives. If the court knew of Loki…there was a chance that Bjarte’s actions would be validated as noble. They would kill her prince or hurt him before he could even process the truth for himself.

She had to tell him. There was no getting around it; he needed to know the truth.

But how could she tell him? How could she even know for sure that all of this wasn’t in her head? Perhaps Loki simply had some Asgardian immune deficiency that made him intolerant to poisons save the one that would kill him.

Even in her current state she knew that wasn’t right.

Ever since they returned she felt tired. Though it had not been a true war, she felt as though
Vanaheim had aged her. It had strengthened her dedication to Asgard and, if possible, her faithfulness to Loki, not only as his friend, but as his partner.

Darcy hadn’t expected new, requited love to feel as it did. Before when Loki was being a dramatic adolescent and denying them their time together, she’d been hurt. Loving him had been some painful burden that she was forced to suffer through just because he couldn’t pull his head out of his ass.

Of course, it had been more than that. He’d been going through something and Darcy was glad that he had come out of it in mostly one piece.

Loving him felt different now. It was sweet and airy and comfortable. It was like being friends, except that urge to reach over and kiss him when they were reading together in the library or cuddling in the early mornings was no longer just some odd feeling that hit her every few seconds. It was an actual desire that could be fulfilled.

And still, beneath the newfound romance, there still lay the underlying nature of their friendship. Loki was her home and her safety, just as she was his. Walking into his arms after a long day was like a breath of fresh air. The trust they had in one another and the security of their relationship was a gift that Darcy was ever so thankful to have been given.

Loki’s near-death experience had reminded Darcy of this and the probability of his otherworldly heritage was putting a damper on her post-war relaxation.

Additionally, Darcy hadn’t told anyone of her suspicions, including Frigga. And now Darcy had the uneasy feeling that she wasn’t leaving the Queen’s chambers without having first relieved her ignorance of the situation.

Darcy sighed, turning her head to glance out the window. Rain watered the earth and city, the world bending with the strength of the wind. It was cold for summer and Darcy watched the goose bumps form on her arms.

“It should have killed him.” Darcy muttered, closing her eyes. That was the first thing she’d said to Frigga in the hour they’d been together that afternoon. The day had been packed with arrangements for Thor’s name day which was coming up soon and other assorted meetings concerning Darcy’s position.

It had been declared that because she was so awesome in leading people at war, she could not be a part of foreign affairs. And while it was a total honor, the added workload was taking some time to adjust.

Frigga’s soft voice drew Darcy from her thoughts, bringing her back to the importance of their conference.

“You knew it wouldn’t hurt him.” Frigga said, slowly turning around. Darcy opened her eyes to face the weary mother who would purge her of any hope she had for peace. Darcy would have to tell Loki and he would hate himself to no end. Darcy didn’t need to see the future to know that. But she would talk him out of it.

Asgardians thought of Frost Giants as monsters. But Darcy wouldn’t let Loki. She didn’t care if it took her the rest of her mortal life, Loki would have peace with himself.

“Is it true?” Darcy asked, her voice a croak as she stared beseeching into Frigga’s pained, blue eyes.
The Queen stayed silent for a long time, her gaze steady upon Darcy’s pleading face. At last, she heaved a sigh, seating herself beside the young advisor.

“I always knew you would uncover the truth.” Frigga said quietly, stroking the side of Darcy’s face.

Emotions stirred inside Darcy like a hurricane before it hit the shore; building its mass, increasing its velocity to better lay waste to the civilization nearby.

“You never told him.” Darcy stated in disbelief, “He hates his own race more than I hate canned peas and believe me, I really hate canned peas.”

“Darcy,” Frigga implored, cupping the girl’s cheek. “Please—“

Angered by her neglect towards Loki, Darcy batted Frigga’s hand away and readily ignored the hurt in her eyes at the rejection.

“You lied to him.” Darcy accused, getting to her feet, “I expect this kind of shit from Odin, but you, Frigga? Really?”

The Queen shook her head, tears beginning to leak down her cheeks. “You intend to tell him the truth.”

Darcy nodded curtly, “Yeah. I do. You don’t need me to tell you that this is going to be Hel for him.”

Frigga was crying now, perfect tears spilled from her eyes and in each of them Darcy felt remorse. Guilt framed her conscience. Snapping at Frigga wasn’t the greatest thing she could have done. Knowing the queen, keeping Loki’s secret was probably super painful, especially when some guy with a weird beard is threatening her son because of it.

Slowly, Darcy approached the Queen, sinking to her knees before her grace.

“Sorry,” she apologized, taking Frigga’s hands, her long, narrow fingers so similar to Loki’s though they shared no blood. “I shouldn’t have said all that. I don’t know your reasons; I just know this situation sucks.”

Frigga breathed deeply, as if more air could staunch her tears. “No, Darcy, I am sorry. You may never forgive me for what I must do, but please understand that it must be done.”

Darcy had only time to gaze up at Frigga for another questioning second before she felt the sharp invasion of Her Majesty’s magic in her mind and everything went dark.

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Loki pulled himself out from under Darcy’s bed, finding her room unusually dark. He’d expected her to be getting ready, for that evening he and Darcy were scheduled to celebrate the end of the war with dinner at a Midgardian restaurant. At first he was opposed to the idea. What was there to be gained from sitting down in a room full of humans, eating food they had to pay for? It hadn’t occurred to him that this was a ritual Midgardian couples would partake in. Hence, he promised Darcy they would dine so handsomely that evening that every meal in comparison would be unsatisfactory in comparison.

It was also his intention to propose to her that they announce their courtship on Asgard.
It seemed appropriate to him that the Nine Realms should know that Darcy was no longer available to be courted and that she was actively being pursued by a prince. Therefore, any other attempts at courtship would be weak compared to his tokens of affection. Loki could admit that he was somewhat jealous when it came to Darcy. Of course he had no reason to be; he trusted her above all people. It was the rest of the universe and beyond he had no trust for. Lord Bjarte’s recent imprisonment was proof of that.

The trials had been long and arduous. Loki had almost never seen Darcy so determined to send someone to rot. She’d spent days and nights in her room and at the library, scouring books for every last shred of useful information, collecting her evidence and organizing each and every word of her speech.

In Midgardian court systems, the fate of the defendant is decided by a group of unassociated members of society called “jurors”. There is a judge who commands the room, and lawyers who either work towards prosecuting the alleged criminal or to defend them. The arguments made by either side are there to convince the jury of one side or the other.

Asgardian court was entirely different. The offender stands in the center of a circular room, the judge, if you will, is the current Head of Justice and part of Odin’s private court. For this case, Lord Solt took the high seat just before the offender. Much like ancient Midgardian theatres, seats encircle the court; here members of the court and associated members of the crime are invited to sit. Lastly there is Sword. The Sword is the one who accuses the offender of his crime. They must also be the one to collect evidence against them who they’ve accused and work to defend their case.

There is a pre-determined list of who gets to speak and bring their testimony to the court, be it for or against the offender. In the end, if the Head of Justice feels that they have sufficient evidence, they assign a sentence. Additionally, the decision of the Head of Justice cannot be countered. They are assigned, in Loki’s opinion, a truly obscene amount of power in the situation. However, the law is ancient and Lord Solt was perhaps the most level-headed and fair man Loki had ever met. Which is why he had no doubt Darcy would convince him of Bjarte’s culpability.

Yes, his Darcy was the Sword of the court and afterwards, everyone was slain. There were several trials, each one more intense than the last. Bjarte had many security measurements and a great deal of information that would relieve him of incrimination. In the end, Darcy managed to prove it was all fake.

But, the part of the trial that still managed to tug on his attention was the part that almost cost Darcy the case.

Advisor Darcy was an authoritative and straight-forward tycoon. She very much meant business and anything less she cut off and fed to the dogs. She was honest and brought forth every ounce of truth she had. It was one of the earlier cases when she accused Bjarte of using magic to control influential members of society. He would cheat at a game and use the bargain to have his fallen opponent do his bidding.

There was a great deal of opposition to this. The Asgardian press called her a story-teller. Even after several members of the audience had come forth to admit that Bjarte had taken control over them, the idea still seemed preposterous. When asked how she knew, Darcy said she had played him and won, so he did not have power over her.

This satisfied the court. Darcy was close to Loki, the victim of the entire scheme. It had been Bjarte’s plot to overthrow Odin by killing off his youngest son in war, weakening the royal family and taking them over from the inside. For some reason, this was enough to placate the court.
But it was apparent to Loki that they had missed the most obvious of question of all. If Bjarte cast the spell for the winner to have power over the loser, after his loss, wouldn’t Darcy take control over him? It would make sense how Darcy managed to score a victory on Vanaheim and how, at the very end of the trials, Bjarte gave in and confessed his crime. It wasn’t necessarily a surprise. It had been nearly two Midgardian months of Darcy tearing at him from as far back as his childhood, arguing with anyone who put in a good word for him.

Still, was it simply hope that kept him thinking that Darcy had some potential for magic? She hadn’t told him. She would know her magical capabilities, wouldn’t she? Or perhaps if she were using them for unjust purposes, she would be ashamed to tell him. Loki figured his last thought entirely wrong; if Darcy were causing mischief he would be the first she told.

Tonight, after Loki proposed that they announce their courtship, he would ask about her ability to use magic. The idea excited him beyond anything. Darcy was his lady; even if she could use only minimal magic, it would be monumental for her being Midgardian.

Loki worked to push the idea from his head. Hope was a treacherous thing and he’d hate for it to betray him if his suspicions were wrong. He focused instead on conjuring his outfit for that evening. He switched on the light, figuring Darcy was in the bathroom. She’d just finished a soccer game and was no doubt finishing up with her bath.

Darcy thought they were going to a small restaurant around town for their date, but Loki had picked out somewhere a little more extravagant for the occasion. He’d read somewhere that Paris was nice this time of year, and it was the Midgardian city of love. He could not ask for a more perfect place to ask her to let him court her.

He decided on a pinstriped black suit, black shirt and dark green tie. Loki checked his reflection in the mirror on Darcy’s door, narrowing his eyes at his complexion. How was it that no matter how intensely he fought and trained, he still managed to be as thin as he was? He supposed it didn’t truly matter, but he had been trying to gain some more bulk since he and Darcy claimed feelings for one another. He wanted to be worthy of her. Her beauty was unparalleled by any Asgardian lady, it seemed only fitting that he should look the part of her suitor. In the past her choice of lover had been among the type of Johnny Storm, otherwise known as a blonde idiot boy with the same mass as his brother. Loki didn’t necessarily fit that criterion. Of course, Darcy hadn’t found him disgusting or repulsive while they were friends, but it is possible given the nature of their current relationship that she would have reservations.

Frustrated with the universe’s overall hatred for him and his happiness, Loki conjured a comb to straighten the few locks of hair that had gone astray.

He was about to conjure himself a coat and shoes to go along with his outfit when he heard a sharp cry followed by shattering glass. Immediately he was on guard, his dagger drawn as he rushed silently into the hall and down the stairs. Midgardian robberies were uncommon in this area and he had no doubt Darcy could defend herself, but guns were something of a concern of his. Mortals were crafty with their firearms and he hated to picture Darcy on the unfortunate side of one.

He sprinted down the stairs soundlessly, coming round the corner, dagger raised, prepared to take deadly aim. It was then that he was met with the most surprising sound.

Crying.

Not Darcy’s crying. But the sharp, high-pitched sobs of an infant.

Loki lowered his dagger, treading carefully into the kitchen where Darcy stood, bouncing on the
balls of her feet and speaking in an anxious tone to a small child in her arms. The sight was so unexpected that he nearly dropped his knife. Darcy in her worn knit pants and one of her dad’s old sweaters, her still damp hair creating little stray curls around her tired face may have been the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Somehow, the addition of the baby made it that much better.

He was distracted from the vision before him by a shattered glass dish on the kitchen tile that Loki deemed too close to Darcy’s bare feet.

“Okay, Cassie, I’ll make you a deal, okay? I’ll set you down for, like, three seconds so I can pee and clean up this mess, okay?” she pleaded though the baby continued to sob.

Loki stepped into the room, waving a hand to repair the broken plate and have Darcy turn to him in relief. “Darcy--?”

“Loki!” she exclaimed, bouncing over to him. “Here, take her. I’ll be right back.”

Without a moment’s notice, Darcy had shoved the wailing baby into his arms, where she choked and sputtered. Loki held up the baby, horror settling in.

Why was she crying? He had no experience with children. What was wrong with her?

He thought to everything he had ever learned about babies.

The dish had broken. Cassie was most likely just scared. Or perhaps uncomfortable.

Carefully, he held her closer to him, cradling her head on his arm.

Big watery tears welled in her brown eyes and Loki found his heart aching for this tiny creature. Why wasn’t it getting better? Was she hurt? He didn’t even know whose baby it was, but the torment the poor little girl was going through was just too much. His heart quickened as he hurriedly thought to rationalize his anxieties and search for a solution.

He knew nothing of babies.

Let alone human babies.

“Shh.” he soothed, touching the little girl’s flushed pink face as a sob rock her tiny body.

He thought to his mother, the woman who had cared for him and Thor when they were children. What would she do? He thought back. He could not remember his infant years, but there were fond memories of his childhood, sitting on Frigga’s knees while she sang to him and learning the foundations in magic.

An idea struck him as he shifted the baby in his arms, her socked feet brushing over his exposed upper arm as she hiccupped, another tear spilling down her cheek. It had been quite some time since he thought about his mother singing to him, but it was impossible to forget the song. Frigga’s voice had been what soothed him into magic. She sang to him when he learned his first spells.

Wiping away one of Cassie’s tears with his fingertips, he began to sing to her. And as he sang, he gently stroked back her soft brown hair and rocked them. Almost immediately her tears stopped and her small lips formed a little ‘o’ as he sang. Loki could not help the tender smile that lit his lips when her little hand touched his face.

When he finished the song, she was blinking at him, as if expecting more.
“Gera ekki æpa, sætur stúlka.” he told her softly, touching her open palm with the pad of his index finger and pulsing a tiny bit of magic so the tips of her fingers twinkled with light, not bright enough to hurt her eyes, but enough to make her giggle.

“I don’t know whether to be thankful or offended that it took you, like, three minutes to get her to calm down whereas in thirty minutes, I got her situation to go from bad to worse.” Darcy’s voice said tiredly from the adjoining hallway.

Loki looked up at her and winked, “I have many talents.”

She smirked, pacing over towards them and Loki took note of how gorgeous Darcy Lewis was.

Her hair was in a messy braid and stray hairs stuck up all around, a few strands even sticking to the sides of her face. There was something so unconventionally beautiful about her in this setting. She was disheveled, tired and messy with what he suspected was baby powder. Yet Loki found her looks to be endearing and he was overcome by a few strong desire to pull her close and be graced by the slow tired feel of her lips.

He shifted the baby in his arms, offering a few multi colored sparks to drift over the girl and she giggled again, making little sounds as the lights drifted over her face.

Darcy smiled, her cheeks flushing as she looked him up and down, the look in her eyes mirroring his current sentiment. “Nice suit.”

“You think so?” Loki queried, moving the baby to one arm so her could pull Darcy close and kiss her softly. The feel of her lips on his was nothing less than Valhalla. She sighed into the kiss, relaxing against him as they broke apart. Ideally, it would have been much longer, but Cassie was a part of the universal agreement to take away everything that brought him joy.

“I take it our dinner plans have been canceled.” Loki said, side-eyeing the child that was now preoccupied with his hair. Given the change in events, he magically exchanged his suit for more casual Midgardian attire. His trousers he kept, but abandoned his coat and tie for a dark green cashmere sweater.

Darcy made a face, grabbing a large bag from across the counter. “I’m sorry. My mom and dad had tickets to go to the opera. My dad nearly wet himself when he heard that someone had finally done Medea. Our neighbors are busy packing, getting ready to move to California, they needed me to take Cassie for the evening.”

Loki looked down at the child who had her large eyes trained on Darcy as she took a bottle full of milk and put it in the microwave. “When will they be ready to receive her again?”

Darcy made an irritated sound that distracted Cassie from the promise of milk. Loki spoke to her again in his native tongue and she brought her small hands to his mouth while he talked.

“How old is she?”

Darcy raised a brow at his interest, “Eight months. She should eat soon. Her mom said she had just gotten off the boob and onto the bottle, but sometimes she would still get crabby about it. She also
says that she’s trying more food-ish foods. So, if she still wants something after milk then we can
try applesauce or some weird baby food crap.”

“I see. Do human children tend to struggle with this transition?” Loki asked, again allowing
Cassie’s fingers to light up.

Darcy made an oblivious gesture, waving around a sheet of paper. “I don’t know man. I’m just
reading this sheet. Come on, let’s try this in the living room.”

Darcy grabbed the bright blue bag from the counter and Loki carried Cassie into the Lewis’ living
space and sat on the couch. Sitting next to him, his friend struggled to get the cap off a bottle filled
with milk. “Would you like me to try?”

She nodded and they made the careful exchange of a baby for a bottle.

With Cassie in better spirits, she seemed to have no problems with Darcy. In fact, even without
magic, Darcy seemed to be entertaining enough. She had hair that could be pulled and glasses to
grab. After the fourth time knocking the dark frames off, Darcy relented by removing her
spectacles and placed them on the table. “Believe me kid, they’re not as fun as they seem.”

At this point, Loki had removed the cap to the bottle, but Cassie seemed happy with mouthing
Darcy’s clothed breast. Darcy quickly held the child away from her. “Woah woah woah. Watch it,
Cass. We haven’t even gotten to first base yet.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “And you accuse me of being immature.” he offered her the bottle.

Feeding went well. Cassie seemed infinitely more interested in Darcy’s breasts than the bottle, so
feeding her was left to Loki.

After baby was fed, burped, and at ease playing with a small stuffed elephant named Ellie on a
small pallet on the floor with an array of other plastic toys. It also happened to be where Fenrir and
Jörmungandr had chosen to take a nap. Loki had wondered where his pets had gotten off to. Loki
summoned Darcy’s laptop to try and do minor research on potential magical anomalies in Virginia
where Darcy had applied to college before Cassie required further attention.

Originally the thought of Darcy moving away had been incredibly daunting. College would no
doubt prove to be more work than she had already. How could she possibly balance her time
between Asgard and education and himself? Of course, Darcy had always been good with those
things.

He found nothing. Midgardians were poor at discovering anomalies. Unless they were mutated in
some fashion, they were unrecognizable to people without magic. That brought his mind once
more to the matter of Darcy’s potential magical capabilities. His heart leapt to his throat as his gaze
flicked to her briefly.

Darcy was reading a history book, her brow furrowed in concentration as she studied. Occasionally,
her phone would vibrate with a text message and she would ignore it with a grimace.

To push the thought from his mind, Loki delved further into his research. He briefly picked up the
topic of SHIELD again, going through a quick review of their brief mention on an obscure
government website and a few official mentions on other unrelated pages. Everything on the
internet about them was extremely vague or generic. He knew that with the right programs, he
would have no problem finding more information. But divulging that knowledge through code
was...well...illegal. And he suspected both the United States’ National Security Agency and
SHIELD would have no problem figuring out the source. He had only just recently been figuring out this finer point of Midgardian technology and there was oh so very much to learn.

He looked up from his studies to check on Cassie who was rather enjoying Ellie’s right ear, though she was starting to get tired. Darcy slammed her book shut, after an especially insistent vibration from her cell phone.

“Who is it you are texting?” he inquired, curious as to what would put his friend in such a state.

Darcy nearly growled her response, “Grace and Ashley.”

He set down her laptop, going to retrieve Cassie from her pallet. “Is she well?”

Darcy’s face turned an even darker shade as her phone vibrated again. “They are dead women.”

He cocked his head to the side in confusion, cradling Cassie to his chest. She really was a sweet child. He wasn’t quite sure how useful the child was or what her purpose was, but she was charming and clearly meant no harm to anything. Loki wondered briefly why his interactions with children had been so minimal. Perhaps he was too caught up in being a child.

“What’d she do this time?” Loki asked, sitting back down as Cassie’s eyelids got heavy. It was nearly time for her to be put to sleep.

“She hasn’t studied for the midterms. I told her a thousand times to do it and she never did. I swear, she’s her own worst enemy.” Darcy tossed her phone onto the table, cuddling up to his side. “I have to change her before she goes down.”

“You could,” Loki agreed, “Or I could do this.”

And with a wave of his hand, Cassie was changed, her footie pajamas in place, her skin shining as if it had just been scrubbed. The change shocked her so much that she began to wail. Gingerly, Loki picked her up and began speaking to her in his language and slowly the baby’s cries subsided into tiny little sobs. When he smiled down at her, she smiled back and Loki rewarded her with lighting her fingertips.

Darcy’s head was on his shoulder again as she offered her finger to the child to clutch. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?” he asked, leaning his cheek on her hair.

Jörmungandr came to bump his nose on Cassie’s head and Fenrir snuggled up next to Darcy on the couch. “Everything,” it sounded like a complaint. “You didn’t even know what a diaper was but you managed to change it. And you get her to stop crying when I can’t. And then there’s the magic thing….”

Loki sighed, wrapping his spare arm around Darcy’s shoulders. “Darcy, I cannot help it that I am perfect. Really, it is a burden.”

He could almost feel her rolling her eyes. “Oh yeah, right.”

He laughed, sitting Cassie up and supporting her back so she could face them. “But I suppose things are easier when one is not exhausted. You have had a long day, Darcy. How was your soccer game?”

“We won.”
“Of course you did.” he grinned and Cassie waved her lighted fingertips around.

Darcy touched the girl’s hand. “How is she doing it?”

Loki touched the baby’s hand and instantly, the light went out. “It is a simple spell. My mother claimed it was the first bit of magic I learned.”

“You found out how to make your fingers glow?”

“Hm.” Loki smiled contentedly. “My mother says I used to annoy Thor with it.”

They laughed and even Cassie joined in, but Loki could sense her little form was growing tired. Darcy stared at the baby a while longer. “Do you think she’ll remember?”

“Perhaps,” Loki replied, gently rubbing the child’s back, “She is rather extraordinary.”

Darcy smiled, holding her arms out for the girl. “Fork her over. Her crib is set up in the dining room.”

Smoothly, Loki eased Cassie into Darcy’s arms. Again, it struck him with a sense of wonder to see Darcy cradle a child in her arms. He’d seen her stand in courts and yell at kings, he’d seen her broken and weak, he’d seen her slay men with nothing more than sheer will and determination on her side. And here she was in a state that was so utterly kindhearted and maternal that he nearly forgot his name.

She carried Cassie to the dining room, leaving Loki to stare after her in awe. Before he knew it, Darcy was back, her socked feet shuffling toward the couch. She stopped in front of the couch, staring down at him sadly.

“Sorry we didn’t get to go out. Especially since I pushed you to do it.” She apologized, pushing stray locks of hair from her face.

Loki cocked a half-smile, taking her hands and pulling her into his lap. “I don’t mind, Darling.”

She smirked, kissing his jaw. “I’m sure. I kinda wanted to do normal people shit, you know?”

Loki’s brow furrowed, “How do you mean?”

Darcy sighed, resting her head on his chest and fidgeting with his tie. “I don’t know. I guess we’ve just finished with a war and then a monster court case and I…I don’t know.”

Her statement ended thickly and Loki worried that she may be on the verge of tears. “Darling…”

“Loki,” Darcy signed, shifting in his lap so they were at even heights, “This is going to sound really stupid, but I feel like there’s something I can’t remember. I want to tell you something, but I have no idea what it is. And I killed men, Loki. I killed a lot of men on Vanaheim and I’m pretty sure that I lied in Asgardian court. I just can’t be sure. I’m losing it. I must be.”

As she began explaining, her voice raised in pitch and tempo until she was speaking so quickly he could barely understand her.

“Slow down,” Loki demanded, rubbing her shoulders soothingly, “Explain.”

She bit her lip, standing up and pacing the room. “I beat Bjarte at his own game. I’ve been doing it since we first met. If I were anyone else, I would be able to control Bjarte with magic. If I were anyone else, I would be able to make him tell me the truth about his motives, I would be able
to make him confess in front of the Asgardian Court, I would be able to feel this block in my head and know that something was wrong.”

Loki sat back on the couch, touching his bottom lip as he thought. “You think you possess magic.”

Darcy kneaded her brow, looking away from him, “You can tell me I’m wrong.”

“No,” Loki said, standing up to take her arms. “Darling, why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

She took her head, running her fingers through her lose braid. “It’s confusing.”

“You just need guidance.” Loki said reassuringly.

Darcy sighed, slinging herself down onto the couch, “I’m going crazy.”

Loki sat down next to her, “You are not crazy. You need rest, just as you said before. A great deal has happened; perhaps we ought to take a break.”

“A break?” Darcy repeated, snorting, “It’s very clear that the world does not want me to take a break. We tried to take a break tonight and it dumped a baby in my lap.” She turned her face into the couch cushions, her legs splayed casually over his lap.

Loki cocked a brow at her, “Say what you will, love, but the night isn’t over yet.”

Darcy turned her head to give him a sly look over her shoulder, “You sound like a man with a plan, Your Majesty.”

“Perhaps,” Loki countered, “Come here.”

It was as if all of the negative energy from their conversation had melted away, resolving into something more precious. Darcy sat up, straddling his lap, a tender smile plucking at the corners of her mouth. Loki wrapped his arms around her, sliding his hands under the hem of her sweater to lightly scratch her back. She hummed in contentment, tangling her fingers in his hair and touching her forehead to his.

Loki gently tugged at the end of her braid, pulling the elastic from hair to that the deep brown strands fell around her face so the smell of her fruity shampoo overwhelmed him. He let his magic wash over her, allowing his every magical awareness go to her. He’d never considered the intimacy of his actions. Even when they were younger he’d opened himself to her out of love, but now there was something more. It was warm and powerful and it was fueled by the tiny sigh that escaped Darcy’s full lips.

“Loki,” she whispered, a small tear leaking from her eye, “Wait.”

It took more effort than it should have, but he relaxed, closing himself off from her once more.

She looked deep into his eyes, cradling his head in her hands. “Don’t you dare distract me, Loki Odinson. If I’ve really got spooky magic tricks, then I should at least be able to do this.”

“Darcy—“

“Shut up,” she commanded, adjusting herself in his lap quite purposefully. Loki waited, hardly able to breathe as she tilted her head and fit her lips perfectly with his.

At first it was just a kiss, the effortless embrace of her lips evenly dividing his blood between his
face and his pants. And that’s when it happened; it was small and indicative of a beginner’s hesitation, but it was there. He felt her. All of her. Every tiny burst of pleasure, the detailed and indecipherable waves of her emotions, the pattern of her thoughts and song of her desires he felt. And in the midst of it all was something else…something no word could ever describe. It was just Darcy.

Loki gasped softly into her mouth, every part of him easing into the warm envelopment of her body. He was surrounded by her, body and mind. It was possibly the safest he’d ever felt. It was one thing to give himself over to Darcy, to let her feel him and all that he was. From the very beginning of their friendship, she was the only one he ever let in. But with their positions reversed, he somehow found himself ever more vulnerable.

He wasn’t sure how long she went on for; he couldn’t keep the time. At last her essence subsided and she pulled away with a tired smile. “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

It took him more time than it should have to formulate a response. “Darcy…do you have any idea…you projected…”

She graced him with a modest little grin, “I don’t really know how to practice. But I wanted this to be a surprise, cuz you always do it for me and I really have always wanted you to feel that and—“

Loki stopped her words with a kiss, unable to resist any longer. Of course Darcy would detect she had magic and, instead of telling him, she practiced first. What was he going to do with this woman? She wiggled her hips in his lap, arousing him ever further.

“Is that Frank in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?” Darcy snickered, rolling her hips again, but slower and more purposeful.

Loki as good as growled, grabbing the backs of her thighs and pulling her closer to him. She gasped at the change of attitude and soon Loki was struggling to keep his wits about him. He had been trained by none other than Yggdrasil’s finest bedmates and it was only natural that he wished to use every ounce of knowledge he’d garnered to please his lady. But he also knew there was merit in patience. Time could be his friend as well as his foe depending on how he chose to act.

His thought process was mercilessly ripped from him by the gyration of Darcy’s hips as she sought friction between them.

From there on out, Loki only had one or two fleeting ideas that ever crossed his mind and they had only to do with getting closer to Darcy Lewis.

He lifted the front of her sweater, not even taking the time to tear it from her body and pulled down the cups of her brassiere as to gain him access to her breasts. She moaned at his mouth on her skin and Loki scarcely remembered the sleeping child not a room away. In fact, her pleasure further enticed him as he spread his palm on her back and gripped her thigh, letting his magic course over her in a hot and passionate reflection of his desire.

“Loki,” Darcy choked his name, her fingers tangling in his hair as she tried to cope with the sensations flowing through her body. “Oh God…”

He relinquished his attentions to her breasts, smirking at her, “Yes?”

This time, it was she who growled at his snark and began to lift the hem of her sweater when they heard the garage door begin to open.

“My parents,” Darcy pulled her sweater down, instantly adjusting her breasts and fanning her face.
“They’re home early.”

Loki took all of one second to decide whether or not he was going to return to Darcy’s room and await her retreat there as well. After a moment’s consideration, he elected to stay. He’d met Darcy’s mother on one odd occasion, after which he put her to sleep, casting her memory of him as no more than a dream. It simply seemed that after all the time Loki had spent inside the Lewis household, he should finally meet the owners formally. Especially since he’d taken interest in courting their daughter.

Of course he couldn’t tell them of his true identity. Nor could he be an idiot boy from Darcy’s school…

He stood with Darcy, waving a hand to cast a freezing sensation through both of their bodies. Darcy shivered hard and shot him an irritated look, “What was that for?! I think you just froze off my nip.”

Loki scowled, “I would never do such a thing. Disfiguring your breasts in any manner would be an unkindness even I, as Prince of Mischief, could not bring myself to do.”

“Oh, please,” Darcy said starkly as they heard her parents talking rather heatedly in the garage, “No need to remind me of your title, Your Highness.”

“Oh of course not, you were rightfully proclaiming me to be a god just a moment ago.” Loki said, smirking in hopes to incense his already fiery mortal. “As for the cold…well, I don’t think I would make the best first impression if your parents were to happen upon me passionately and heedlessly lusting after their youngest.”

Darcy’s eyes widened to the size of Asgardian feasting platters, her cheeks blushing red at his words. “Loki, my parents…Loki not now—”

“Darcy, we’re home early!” Darcy’s mother called from the wash room, “Your father hadn’t mentioned that he managed to buy double booked tickets from a shady dealer! We—“

Her oncoming tirade was halted by the piercing cries of a most unhappily disturbed Cassie.

“Go calm her down, would you?” she asked him, though the question was of rhetorical nature. Loki smiled to himself as Darcy hurried away to placate her mother and father with an explanation. He magicked Jörmungandr and Fenrir to Darcy’s room, imagining that Darcy’s parents would be less than thrilled to see a giant snake cuddling with their household pet.

Loki went in the opposite direction to the dining room where he reached into Cassie’s crib and pulled the sobbing child into his arms. She calmed almost immediately, her large blue eyes still filled with unshed tears. He bounced her in his arms, whispering words in Allspeak until she was all but bewitched. Her tiny body drooped against him in defeat as his lullaby won out against her wakefulness. Darcy and her parents entered the dining room just in time to see him settle Cassie back down into her crib.

 Needless to say, her parents did not look amused at the prospect of bringing a boy into their house without telling them about it first. However, Loki knew too well that her parents wouldn’t bring this to attention while he was still present. It occurred to him then that he would have to feign and exit before returning magically to Darcy’s room.

Without so much as moving his arm, he conjured a rather sleek automotive vehicle on the street by Darcy’s house without Darcy’s mother and father noticing. He gave them a small smile, wondering
how he ought to act. He was a prince and an Asgardian, so it was unlikely that he would show any form of weakness or vulnerability to these mortals. Darcy being the exception. Instead he vouched to treat them as equals despite age, race, or political positions.

Darcy beckoned them quietly out of the dining room so they might convene in the living quarters. Once there, she addressed her parents.

“Mom, Dad, this is my friend—“

“Loki Odinson,” Loki introduced himself smoothly as ever, extending his hand firstly to Mrs. Lewis as a gesture to perform the Midgardian greeting of a ‘handshake’. He then presented the same courtesy to Mr. Lewis and was pleased that both had excepted his offer with only looks of mild surprise.

There was something of a flash of recognition in Mrs. Lewis’ narrowed eyes as she evaluated him. Mr. Lewis cleared his throat, giving Loki a friendly smile, “Well, beg your pardon, Loki, we didn’t know Darcy was going to have friends over tonight.”

That much Loki knew to be true. He opened his mouth to respond when Mrs. Lewis spoke in a knowing, motherly voice to her daughter, “Darcy, where did you two meet? I expect he doesn’t go to your school.”

Darcy nodded, looking incredibly sheepish. He couldn’t tell whether it was an intentional appearance or if everyone simply looked that way under the scrutiny of their mothers. “The library. We met at the library.”

“And became friends?” Mrs. Lewis inquired further, a smile in her voice.

Loki had never, in all their time together, seen Darcy crumble so completely under someone’s glare, “Well…Mom, it’s not exactly, that is ‘we’ aren’t exactly…Mom—“

Loki was so amused by the situation and how flustered Darcy had become, it encouraged further mischief. “Darcy, have you not told your mother of—“

“Loki, shut up.” Darcy snapped at him, “We haven’t even—“

“—Or have we?” Loki countered, thoroughly enjoying himself as Darcy got more frustrated.

Darcy’s father and mother shared a look. Mrs. Lewis rolled her eyes, “Loki, have you eaten dinner yet? Michael and I were going to order a pizza.”

Loki was taken back only for a moment before nodding politely, “Yes, thank you.”

And that night, after an unexpected dinner with Darcy and her parents, Loki and Darcy retired to Asgard where he proposed a formal courtship. Her acceptance was displayed in a rather zealous show of passion in the dark and glimmering halls of Asgard.

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Sigyn stood by her work bench, intently staring down at a design for a warrior-woman’s armor. It was a sketch she had run into years ago in the library and she remembered sharing it with Sif. Sigyn had thought that the armor would be a good fit for her lady, but now that she considered it more, Sif wasn’t the kind of warrior to wear it.

She suspected it was one of Baldur’s patterns that he intended to be made with Valkyrie hide,
which was the same material that made the arrow Loki was attacked with during the war. The
drawing was fairly complex. The original maker had very much wanted whoever wore it to
resemble a bird. The make was light and flexible, allowing the warrior a rather wide range of
movement and every piece was decorated with ornate feather patterns.

Of course it wasn’t a complete sketch. Just one full-bodied picture of the end product. But Sigyn
had a lot of ideas about what it could be.

She glanced over her shoulder at Baldur who was hammering away at pieces for a helm. Part of
her wanted to tell him about her ideas to re-design the piece, but she also wanted it to be a surprise.
Baldur, despite all odds, had become her friend and, she dared say, a father figure. Although they
snapped at each other constantly and their favorite pastime included grumbling rude things to the
other from their separate benches, there was a special kind of bond they had formed. They went to
town for lunch and laughed at people they thought were ridiculous. And sometimes, when she
needed help or advice, he would happily give it to her.

Folding the drawing on it’s worn crease, she stowed it in her journal.

Baldur stopped hammering to set the piece back in his forge. “Sigyn,” he grunted, preparing his
tools for the next part of the shaping process.

She made a sound to let him know she’d heard him, though she wasn’t truly paying attention. Her
focus was instead on the charcoal lines she was drawing.

“I need you to find a dying star.” He said gruffly, taking out the metal again to continue pounding
it, “I’ve got to finish this armor for some kid. Parents weren’t too wealthy, paid what they could to
keep their boy safe.”

Sigyn nodded thoughtfully. Baldur always took better care of his work when it was for the
common. He figured they deserved it more than the snobbish lords that always needed a new helm
or their blades oiled.

“So, go find a star that’s near the end and we’ll head out tonight,” he instructed off-handedly, “The
Allfather says he needs an anniversary gift for the Allmother. ‘New set of blades, forged in the
heart of a dying star.’”Baldur quoted the order with a snort of disbelief, “King’s got taste.
Dangerous taste. At least it wasn’t like Mjolnir. Had to siphon thunder into the damn forge to do
that…”

He muttered to himself bitterly for a second, but Sigyn could tell he liked it in part. He got bored
sitting around working on the same things all day.

Her assignment finally clicked in her head and Sigyn sat up curiously, “How do I find a dying
star?”

Baldur waved her off with a chuckle, “Part of your training, apprentice. Go figure it out.”

Sigyn rolled her eyes, standing up from her bench and going to wash her hands in the spring at the
mouth of the cave before leaving Baldur’s shop. She’d long since given up actually relying on
Baldur to tell her how to do anything. The most he would do is give her vague phrases such as ‘dig
over by the mountain’ or ‘tap it harder…I didn’t say to fucking break it.’ Sigyn had soon learned
that, in the end, she was going to have to figure her own way around the grueling, laborious work
of smithing. She did not wish to sound vain by any means, but she was becoming rather good on
her own.
Baldur’s insistence on her independence in learning inspired her to be able to work on the Valkyrie armor as a side project. Perhaps, if she managed to find an old enough star, they could forge Queen Frigga’s daggers and Sigyn could collect enough star dust to make the armor. Satisfied with her plan, Sigyn stood by the stables outside the shop, realizing once more that Gareth wasn’t there.

It hadn’t occurred to Sigyn that ending her courtship with Thor meant that she couldn’t borrow his steed. Not that it mattered; she’d been informed that Gareth had been slaughtered in the war. Thor seemed not to care, but Sigyn mourned his loss. She’d come to truly appreciate the horse. He was unlike his owner, patient, clever and a true delight to have around. Sigyn had been telling herself for days that she needed to invest in a horse. She had the money. Baldur had been paying her well for her work and she was damned determined not to use any of her parent’s money.

Things were at a standstill with her family.

Sigyn was an adult, which meant that she couldn’t be disowned. However, they could still bring Hel upon her if they knew she was actively courting a woman. Her courtship with Sif had been announced that she was courting one of the Prince’s Warriors. It was an honor to be with his personal guard, although her parents still considered it a step down from being Queen. Sigyn intended to stay out of their awareness until she could conjure a way out of her dilemma.

It had been nearly two seasons and she had nothing. Sigyn was very much in favor of forgetting the matter of her parents altogether and asking Sif to marry her.

The idea was very appealing. Sigyn had thought everything through. She would make her lady a gift. Something she needed, like new wrist guards. Then, she would make her something she didn’t need that wouldn’t get in the way of her fights, like a ring. First, she would present the practical gift as a sign of their domesticity and Sigyn’s ability to provide for Sif’s needs. She would suggest they go somewhere outside the palace to eat and then go somewhere meaningful to them. Perhaps the spot in the library where they first kissed. Then, Sigyn would make her proposal, present the smaller more sentimental present in order to show her lady how much she thought about her. It was a brilliant plan.

Sigyn had everything ready. The wrist guards were made and the ring was polished and set in a lovely box that Darcy helped her to procure. But Sigyn wasn’t sure Sif would say yes.

Couples would often court for years, centuries even before deciding that they wished to be wed. Sigyn was not attempting to rush matters, but something in her very much wished to make Sif hers. She wanted Asgard to know that two women of high birth and status could find love and be happy. She wanted men to stop making advances at her and her lady. She wanted to move out of the palace and live in a home where she and Sif could make love on every available surface with no care in the world.

She wanted to eat breakfast just the two of them and have friends over for dinner. She wanted a private library and a very firm bed that belonged to both her and Sif. She wanted something that was ‘theirs’.

But would Sif want the same? Or would she be hesitant to be married so young?

The wedding could be small. No one would even have to come, though Sigyn suspected Darcy would kill them if she weren’t invited. And, of course, Loki. Sif would want to invite Thor, the warriors tree and Tyr. Sigyn knew Baldur would come if she asked him to. But she had no need for anyone else. She could go wearing her blacksmith’s apron for all she cared.

Sigyn thought hotly about that which she desired above all else as she took Baldur’s horse, Hilde,
from the stables. She was a fine horse, a bit old, but incredibly feisty. She was also enormous and could have crushed Gareth under hoof. Initially, she had been unaccustomed to anyone but Baldur, but Sigyn had gained her trust through long hours of dedicated carrot feeding and warm baths. Hilde loved to be clean.

Sigyn mounted her steed, heading for the palace. If a star needed to be found, then she must speak to the people who know nearly everything.

Once at the palace, she dismounted, making a trip through the gardens and heading up to the library where she stalked to Loki’s table to find him absent.

This was very odd. It was barely dark and Loki wasn’t nose deep in some thick tome, idly casting his magic at nothing.

Sigyn thought for a moment. If Loki wasn’t nose deep in his studies, there was only one other thing he could be nose deep in.

Darcy was usually much more difficult to locate due to her number of meetings, but Sigyn had found that her friend had a rather strange amount of spare time as of late. They had spent a great deal of time together recently, though if Loki were to stumble across them there would be no more conversation and Sigyn would politely excuse herself before they began embracing one another as new lovers oft do.

Not that she could speak bad of them, really. Darcy had suffered through countless obnoxious displays of affection when her and Sif first acknowledged feelings for one another. They’d been insatiable. Sigyn supposed the same was true now, she’d just managed some control over her lust. Darcy and Loki would get there one day.

Sigyn happened to recall that it was tysdagr, second day of the week and Darcy was typically occupied from early morning to evening. She’d mentioned just yesterday that her only meeting of importance was with Odin because he had to speak with her about how greatly he disapproved of her and Loki’s courtship for the second time.

She headed in the direction of Odin’s chambers, stopping along the way to glance in empty leisure chambers for her friends. Soon enough, she found Darcy and Loki barely inside a room, furiously and passionately kissing. Sigyn was appalled, for she wasn’t sure that she and Sif had ever reached such fervent levels of apparent desperation. Sigyn always expected Loki to be one for skill, but the true anger and frustration he seemed to radiate was not without merit. Sigyn knew how arousing rage could be if used correctly.

The phenomenon continued only briefly after Sigyn entered the chamber before Darcy and Loki broke apart, breathing heavily and incredibly flustered.

“Sigyn,” Darcy said, clearing her throat, “Hello.”

Loki just gave her a sour look and Sigyn winked at him.

“Darcy, Loki,” she greeted, trying her best not to cackle at their humiliation, “it just so happens that I have a query you might have the answer to?”

The promise of a questioned lured Loki out of his bitterness for a moment.

“What query, Lady Sigyn?” he asked skeptically, gaze flicking to Darcy for a bare second.

Sigyn smirked, “I need to know the location of a dying star.”
“A dying star?” Darcy repeated, “Is that all?”

“Yes,” Sigyn replied, rolling her eyes, “I beg your pardon, some of us have chosen to fill our minds with other useful things other than that which you know.”

“Like what? Have you finally managed to memorize every detail of Sif’s backside?” Darcy retorted and Sigyn had half a mind to aim a bony hit at her breasts.

“Not quite,” Sigyn said, turning to Loki, “The dying star?”

Loki conjured in his hand a colored map of a life-like depiction of the Asgardian sky. He pointed to a darkly hued one just beside the constellation of Gunderjaln the Great. “This one has just begun to die. It’s very fresh if you’re looking to smith. It has a year left approximately.”

Sigyn nodded, considering the star. “Anything older?”

“How old?” Darcy asked, now focused on Loki’s map as well.

“A star that is due to die by tomorrow morn.” Sigyn answered promptly.

Darcy pointed to a more distant star. It was larger than the others and appeared to be nearly quaking for release.

“That should do,” Sigyn said, turning over her shoulder to look at the night sky and locate the star. It took her a moment, but she did it.

Loki pursed his lips, “It could supernova. Perhaps even form a black hole?”

Darcy gave him a firm look, “Yes. Yes it could. Which is why we should stay far away from the event horizon, because that is truly the point of no return.”

Sighing, Loki began to argue with her, “Darling, how are we supposed to advance magic if we do not attempt the impossible? The answer is, we cannot.”

“Yes we can!” Darcy countered, “We’re just not going to stay clear of our body masses being squished by overwhelming gravitational force.”

“I didn’t say I wished to go inside the black hole. But imagine what kind of portal that might make.” Loki suggested.

The debated the issue for a while and Sigyn stopped paying attention. The magic they spoke of was not any magic she had used before.

“Loki,” Sigyn interrupted their flirting, “May I borrow that map?”

He handed it to her, still bickering with Darcy. They were resolving on something when Sigyn left for the stables. Hilde raced back to Baldur’s shop and when Sigyn had climbed down the ladder, she saw Baldur throwing tools and leathers into an enormous sack as the coals in his forge burned blue.

Sigyn approached the embers, looking down at them skeptically. “Your forge…”

Baldur turned to the flames, chortling to himself. “No. They’re for us. Did you find a star?”

“Yes,” Sigyn said, feeling to make sure the map was still in her apron pocket.
“Good,” Baldur said, setting his large, callused hand dangerously close to the flame. “Now, when you forge inside a star, you must go inside the star. It’s strange, you can’t breathe and it’s difficult to move. But it’s cooled enough that you can forge there. Still, it is very hot, so you have to smith quickly. We’ll rub these embers on ourselves to avoid getting burned to death. A good spell for a smith to know. I’ll teach it to you tomorrow.”

She cast him a look of disbelief, “You want to rub these embers on our skin?”

But Baldur had already grasped a handful of the flaming coals and turned them over on Sigyn’s head. She sighed as a comfortable heat enveloped her and subsided. Baldur stood in his forge, scrubbing himself with the embers. They seemed to set his skin aflame with blue fire, only for a moment before becoming a part of him so he glowed a bright, pale blue. Sigyn did the same till they both lit up the shop like giant Asgardian beacons.

Baldur checked to make sure that she was glowing brightly enough before slinging his blue satchel over his shoulder and gesturing for her to follow him.

“We’ll be taking Hyrrokkin,” Baldur informed her as they stalked down the hall to his treasure chamber. They were once again in the room with Nanna’s armor and the chest that held the star dust. But Baldur didn’t pay any of it mind, heading straight for the door. He unlocked it, ducking through.

Sigyn followed close behind, her jaw going slack at the sight before her. They stood at the bottom of a trench filled with still groundwater. Baldur had built a magnificent wooden dock just to harbor a true spectacle of a ship she assumed was Hyrrokkin. It’s masts were intricately carved with the heads of birds and the mast was thicker than the oldest tree in the Eternal Forests. The entire ship was blackened, as if charred. But upon further inspection, Sigyn noted that the wood was just truly that dark. As they approached it, Sigyn noticed it emanated a blue glow, she like her and Baldur.

“A wonderful ship, this is,” Sigyn commented as she walked up the ramp to board.

“That she is,” Baldur sighed nostalgically, leaning against the mast. “We’re going to be taking her to the star you found. I’ll captain, you can be my crew.”

Sigyn opened her mouth to protest that she’d never crewed a ship before, but Baldur waved a hand at her as he approached the mast, “My apologize, Lady Sigyn, but is this too much work for you? Would you prefer to sit and sew? Perhaps feast on a few cakes?”

“Oh, shut up,” Sigyn said, grabbing a rope to let the sail down. “I’ve never done this before.”

“It’s simple,” Baldur assured, grabbing a large handle at the helm of the ship, “Just catch the wind.”

He lifted up on the handle and like any longship Sigyn had ever taken, it began to fly. Sigyn had never felt the thrill of magic so powerfully as the fantastically huge ship elevated from the water, soaring out of the trench like a giant black beast. When they hit the open air, Sigyn gasped in wonder. The sky was clear and every breath she took seemed to strengthen her love for her profession.

Baldur flew them for a bit as Sigyn adjusted herself to how the ship moved. Finally he called out to her over the wind and distance, “All right, Sigyn. Where’s your star?”

Sigyn turned around in circles, looking for the distant star that was near bursting with energy. She found it by looking out towards the bifrost and directing her attention upwards. She pointed at it,
meeting Baldur and the handle, adjusting his position till they were flying directly towards it. Sigyn enjoyed their view, looking forwards to forging Queen Frigga’s gift. She thought about how she would recount this story for Sif when she returned home later that night. She thought about Darcy and Loki most likely kissing between insults and arguments.

A shill passed through her as the breached the atmosphere and they sped even more quickly towards the star.

“I’m going to give us a kick!” Baldur shouted from the helm, “Otherwise we wouldn’t get there till morn!”

Sigyn was about to ask when that meant when Baldur jerked up on the handle and Sigyn was thrown back against the mast, clinging on for dear life as they hurtled through space towards their desired location. They began to slow as she took notice of the smell of gas.

Sigyn opened her eyes to find that the space around her was no longer empty and black, but filled with a dense cloud that was radiating from a bright Hubble before them that she suspected to be the dying star. It was beautiful. Dulled in color, but still light. It looked as though it were shedding its layers as more and more clouds drifted from its body. What intrigued her further were the little balls of light that also came away. As if this monster star were recycling itself, producing more stars than ever.

Her and Baldur flew closer towards the center and Sigyn sensed a growing heat as they went on. It wasn’t painful, just slightly uncomfortable. Finally they approached the core of the star and Baldur spoke to her once more.

“Sigyn, once we go in, we must forge quickly. The spell allows you to breathe, but it’s awful. You chose a dying star alright. This one looks like it might be ready to explode any second. If that does happen, stay on the ship and look out for the dust. It’s going to fill up this ship and we’ll have a Hel of a time cleaning it out.” He said, shortly ending his forewarning.

Steadily, they surged into the star and Sigyn felt like she was getting a bath in fire. The air she breathed was hot and tasted miserable and she felt like she could have sat in an ice bath for an eternity. But the view was worth her discomfort. Everything around her was alive and free, though nothing burned. So much fire and energy, but it was not destructive. Just bright.

Baldur took the metals out of his bag and tossed a lump to Sigyn along with a few of her tools. He started hammering outside the Hyrrokkin and Sigyn did the same. The star worked quickly, making the metal soft and white hot in a near instant, forcing her to shape it quicker than any smith ever had to. She brought the dagger back onto the ship where the heat of the star did not reach it entirely to make out the handle and blade.

The star did something to the metal that Sigyn couldn’t quite place. Not harder or more flexible, but it have the weapon a kind of power that suited Queen Frigga in every possible way.

Sigyn and Baldur worked relentlessly for nearly an hour, comparing shapes and deciding on a pattern to embellish in each. Every now and then, Sigyn thought she might have seen something inside the star, but quickly went back to her work, not needing the distraction. Once they’d completed their work, Baldur clapped her on the back and they congratulated each other on their efforts, teasing about who did the better job.

They were laughing to themselves then there was a distinct change in energy within the star. Like all that was sustaining its heat was about to collapse.
“Man the sails,” Baldur commanded, taking his handle and jerking upwards in panic. But nothing happened, instead, they were at a standstill as everything around them seemed to deteriorate. They flames blew in every direction and the gases scattered, throwing every last piece of the star galaxies away from them. In the stars place was a gaping black hole.

Sigyn rolled her eyes, heaving an exasperated sigh. Of course this would happen to her. She was going to die in the middle of space just as she found happiness and before she even got to marry her love.

The black hole was swallowing everything and she looked back at Baldur for reassurance, but he was gripping onto the handle, fighting the force at which the hole pulled them into it.

She was five seconds from letting go and getting her fateful death over with when four familiar bodies tumbled on deck from above. They struggled to stay on, gripping the helm opposite of Baldur.

“I told you it was a supernova!” Darcy shouted at Loki. “And this is no tiny black hole either!”

“Like you have any experiences with black holes!” Loki countered, holding her closer to him, securing her in his grip as they held onto the mast. Their pets were beside them, the snake wrapping himself around the mast and securing the wolf as well, making a series of worried noises as they struggled to stay together.

While it was evident that Darcy and Loki were shouting at one another, their voices were incredibly soft, as if the sound they made was being sucked into the hole beneath.

Loki groaned, “I knew we should have departed and see the hole from a distance, but you wanted to stay just a little longer!”

“Oh please!” Darcy argued, her arms trembling, “You were going to get closer to the hole anyways!”

“It’s always my goal to get closer the hole!” Loki said, smirking at his advisor.

Darcy gave him an incensed glare, “Well, you aren’t very successful!”

“I’m pretty close today!” he said, nodding towards the black hole and Darcy laughed humorlessly as Loki grinned.

Sigyn couldn’t believe them. They were quarreling in the face of death. Of course they weren’t even looking at death because they were too busy staring at one another.

Finally, they took a second to look around them and they noticed Sigyn and Baldur. Darcy smiled at them as Loki analyzed their situation.

“This ship will be torn to pieces in a few minutes, so we must work fast!” he said to Darcy, “The enchantment is extremely powerful. It must have been cast by several sorceresses of great skill!”

Darcy held onto him tighter, her back to the hole, “You can’t close it! Gravitational force of this magnitude—“

“I know!” Loki said and Sigyn felt the strength of the hole dwindle only slightly. She gained a shred of hope that she might live another day. Another look at her princely friend and her hope was lost. He looked as though he might die himself. His skin had paled and his grip on the helm had weakened, so Darcy was the only thing keeping him there.
“Loki!” Darcy called, “Release the spell! A portal! You can make a portal! Release the spell!”

He did so and the ship reverted to its original state. It began to shake as strips of the sail began tearing off and being sucked into the void.

Loki held Darcy close, telling her something that Sigyn couldn’t make out. For a moment, Darcy’s eyes turned incredibly tender as she pressed a kiss to his lips. She pressed her forehead to his and Sigyn could see the life practically drain out of her short, clever friend. And as this happened, Loki’s strength grew enough that he opened his palm to the black hole.

Sigyn watched in amazement as what looked like a mist of rainbow light fell from Loki’s fingers in surprising quantity. He held onto Darcy, who had gone limp, watching the magic form what looked like a tiny circle in the center of the hole.

Loki jerked his chin at his pets, signaling for them to let go. They hesitated, but sensing his concern and anger, they did so, getting sucked into the portal in the center of the blackness.


Sigyn looked back at Baldur, waiting for him to release the handle. But he didn’t do it. He was still struggling. Sigyn had faith in Loki and his spellwork. They would get out of here with his help, or die without it.

“Baldur!” Sigyn shouted, “Let go!”

He looked up at her and shook his head, muscles straining as he continued pulling.

Loki’s presence burned with shock at Baldur’s disobedience and lack of trust. Then she felt him turn angry. Just like the star explosion, it was a shift in energy. Only he was more palpable somehow. The image of Asgard’s dark prince, clutching onto his potentially dead beloved as his hair fell forwards in the direction of the black hole. Sigyn watched as a single tear left his eye, as it was sucked downwards into the hole.

That’s when he let go. Holding Darcy against his chest with her head cradled into his neck, the Prince of the Realm Eternal plummeted head first into the abyss. Sigyn watched them disappear into the rainbow circle and knew that if she wanted to live, she would have to do the same.

But just before the let go of the mast, she looked to Baldur. He was still struggling helplessly. The ship was starting to shake more violently and Sigyn saw a plank fly into the hole and disappear. Sigyn didn’t know whether it was the boat or him, but he wasn’t releasing the energy. The thought of leaving him broke her heart, but she had a lady. Sif needed her. She wanted to live and love. She did not want to die with a friend because he was holding onto a lost cause.

They met eyes for a bare moment, Sigyn’s apology burning into his face as she released the mast and let gravity take her.

It was so peaceful. For a moment, all Sigyn could see was black. Space pressed around her like a forceful cushion, keeping her in place as she was sucked up into the enormous hole. At the center she saw the portal and dove through it without a thought. Even if she died, she had tried her best to survive.

Alas, in a burst of rainbow magic she found herself splashing into a freezing lake. Sigyn tread water, coughing and sputtering, gazing around her for a speck of land to swim to. But she saw nothing except two other heads not too far away and the silhouette of a dog treading water.
“Loki!” Sigyn called desperately, relief flooding through her when the prince met her gaze.

“Sigyn,” he said, voice trembling. He looked incredibly weak, “I’ve been an idiot. We’re miles away from shore and I have to wait for my magic to replenish. Gods…and Darcy…”

Advisor Darcy looked worse for wear. She was still unconscious as Loki managed to keep them both afloat. Jörmungandr and Fenrir were nearby; the serpent perched on Fenrir’s back, keeping them both afloat. “Is she alive?”

“Yes,” Loki breathed, “Yes, she is. But she gave me all of her strength so I could get us out.”

Sigyn shivered, a thought popping into her head that she wished she’d only thought of before, “Why didn’t we just call Heimdall?”

Loki shook his head, “No, he wouldn’t have been able to do it. Far too dangerous.”

“Heimdall!” Sigyn shouted into the sky, hoping to call his attention.

“I’ve tried him!” Loki growled, “I don’t know why he hasn’t—“

Suddenly, an enormous longship fell into the water beside them, missing their head by a hairsbreadth and sending waves cascading over their heads. Baldur looked down at them, looking fairly shaken. “You all look like you could use a ride.”

Sigyn laughed, elation firing throughout her soul. Baldur wasn’t dead. There was a ship. They were going to live.

Just then a rainbow vortex shot down from above, capturing them all in its powerful beam. It was magical; Sigyn’s mind once more filled with bliss at the knowledge that she was going home. She was going to see Sif again. She was going to see Sif and make sure that she knew absolutely nothing of the perils she had undergone. Her lady would worry too much. Sigyn thought it was rather ridiculous that while she did worry about Sif while she was away, Sif worried infinitely more about the smallest of things. If Sigyn so much as got a scratch, Sif was prepared to fight whatever did it.

Loki, Darcy, Jörmungandr, Fenrir and Sigyn were tossed unceremoniously onto the rainbow bridge before Heimdall and only had a split second to move before Baldur and his ship came barreling through. Sigyn imagined that the ship would come to a halt and Baldur would have to find some way to move it out of the bifrost, but the ship kept cruising along. The entrance to the bifrost expanded to let Baldur out and shrunk again when the mast had passed through. Baldur shouted to her over her shoulder, “Apprentice, I expect to see you at dawn. We’ve got work to do!”

Sigyn grumbled irritably to herself, thinking that she wouldn’t be asleep until dawn. Her veins were bursting with energy and excitement. Having faced her death and come out alive had caused her blood to sing and her heart to beat with unequivocal power. The only thing she wanted to do was grab Sif, take her to bed and fuck until she couldn’t see straight.

But before Sigyn could even stand up, she remembered Darcy.

Loki was on his knees beside his lover, her head in his lap as he let his hands hover over her face. Heimdall had rushed over as well, standing by as Loki cast enchantments over his advisor. Darcy opened her eyes and sat up with a start, coughing and sputtering, draining the liquid from her lungs. Loki helped using magic and rubbing her back soothingly as their pets licked her face happily.

“There Darling, it’s alright. We’ve survived. All thanks to you because you are truly an idiot. An
idiot whom I owe my entire life to.” He said calmly and Sigyn knew this was going to turn into
another one of their bickering games until they ended up kissing.

It seemed now that Darcy just didn’t have the energy for it and was now leaning against her prince,
staring up at him with wide eyes, “I’m sure we’re pretty even by now. You’d better get me home
before I end up dead at the bottom of some ditch.”

Loki chuckled, lifting his lady in his arms and carrying her to the end of the bifrost, Jörmungandr
and Fenrir following in his wake.

“Thank you, Heimdall,” Loki said, stopping by the gatekeeper and bowing his head.

Heimdall bowed in return, “Of course, Prince Loki. Stay with her.”

Darcy smirked, “Oh, you act like he wasn’t already planning on following me around for the next
week to make sure I don’t just keel over and die.”

Heimdall chuckled as Loki and Darcy continued to bicker lovingly at one another as Loki carried
her from the bifrost, disappearing in a cloud of green mist once they were a few paces out. Sigyn
shook her head after them and jumped when Heimdall addressed her.

“You had best be getting home, Lady Sigyn,” Heimdall warned with a twinkle in his deep golden
eyes, “Your lady has paced a hole in the floor. She heard word of catastrophe from the Queen and
has not calmed since. I’ve called a horse for you.”

It was at that moment an Einherjar came thundering into the bifrost, a glorious gray steed at his
side. Sigyn thanked Heimdall quickly before mounting the horse and charging towards the palace
at a ridiculously dangerous speed. She nearly ran over several people, but she was in such a rush,
she couldn’t be bothered to care.

As she rode, the black hole kept flashing before her eyes and she remembered thinking she was
going to die, her only regret being that she hadn’t asked Sif to marry her.

Once at the palace she ran to her chambers, finding Sif pacing there, just as Heimdall promised.

Sif turned bright red in the face, clearly prepared to scream at her for all that she could have done
to herself when Sigyn fell to her knees, looking up at her lady with all the love she had to give.

“Lady Sif, I love you,” Sigyn said, opening her arms wide, “I have done something incredibly
stupid and ignorant and I love you. Marry me.”

Sif’s words somehow got caught in her throat and she stood there, gaping like a fish as Sigyn
waited. There were a few seconds were Sif seemed to be remembering how to breathe and just
when Sigyn started doubting herself, she was tackled to the ground by her lady. They were kissing
and it was all tongues and teeth and unbridled passion.

“Is that…a…yes?” Sigyn managed through kisses as Sif began, quite literally, tearing her clothes
off.

“Yes, you absurd woman,” Sif said, grasping Sigyn’s face in her hands, “And you are in no way
escaping the lecture I’m going to give you…in the morning…or afternoon.”

Needless to say, Sigyn didn’t make it to Baldur’s shop until much later the next day. He didn’t ask.
Instead he smiled and asked her if she’d made the ring yet. Sigyn showed it to him and decided
that she was the happiest woman alive.
Darcy walked through the stone streets of Asgard, a purpose in her step as children played and people chatted. She wore a purple cloak with a hood that hid her face. Ever since she and Loki had begun their courtship, her face had become even more widely known than it had been prior. Not a week ago, there was a royal party to celebrate the end of the spring festival. It was there that Loki had stood up to make the announcement that he was courting his advisor. He’d put it off for several months simply so that he could collect the largest crowd of people in order to make their courtship more widely known.

It was truly surprising how many people were unphased by this news. Sif and Sigyn had rolled their eyes and Fandrall jeered that it was about time. Thor congratulated them in a very brotherly type fashion, giving Loki a wink before he left.

After their little black hole excursion with Sigyn, she’d been outrageously happy and Darcy suspected it had something to do with the ring on Sif’s finger. Ring giving wasn’t a typically popular engagement tradition on Asgard, but Darcy had a hunch that they were just waiting for the right time to make the announcement. Darcy suspected they would be in the same boat of disapproving parents as Loki seeing as how the only person who was truly perturbed by the gesture was Odin, who looked as though he might keel over based on the shade of purple he’d turned at the mention of their courtship.

But it wasn’t Loki the Allfather had chosen to reprimand, but Darcy. The following day, he’d summoned her to his office and told her off for nearly an hour. He made it perfectly clear that he detested all of Darcy and went as far as informing her that he would never accept her potential marriage to Loki. He even threatened to strip her of her power, which he could technically do.

Darcy wasn’t one to stand idle, even when the King of Yggdrasil was shouting at her and banging his all powerful magic stick on the ground. They argued until the sun set and the stars illuminated their expressions of dislike. Finally, Odin relented and while he would not condone their courtship, he would not banish his son’s Advisor to Jotunheim.

Odin was the least of her worries. The moment Loki announced their courtship, society made it an official bond. It had been a long time in the making and Asgard had welcomed her with open arms. Things were at peace. The Nine Realms were quiet at last.

Almost…too quiet.

As a matter of fact, it had barely been two weeks since the end of the Bjarte Trials and she was already getting bored with her job. She found herself finishing her school work and her work as an Advisor and still having a considerable amount of time on her hands. Coincidentally, she was spending an awful lot of time with Loki in the library, goading him into teaching her magic.

It was extremely taxing work. Apparently, the projecting of herself onto other things was the simplest form of magic and also the extent of what she could do. Loki said it was because she was mortal and it would most likely take years before she could develop anymore. Even so, Loki taught her. They spent hours in the library at a time, Loki holding her hands, coaxing tiny blips of magic out of her at a time. He referenced thousands of books and demonstrated the effects of different spells.

It wasn’t until him teaching her that Darcy truly recognized the power Loki possessed. He was without a doubt, one of the most powerful sorcerers on Asgard. His work was effortless; it was like breathing to him. The energy that coursed through his veins followed the flow of the world around him, creating a wealth of power in his fingertips. The whole prospect was rather arousing and
Darcy was almost ashamed to say that she couldn’t keep focus on her studies for long without acting on the vicious desires of her body.

What could she say? She’d been secretly denying herself of him for a year and vice versa. There was a great deal of pent up sexual tension that demanded release.

Even so, that release had yet to come. Darcy wasn’t quite sure why they hadn’t gotten around to doing the deed, but every time, something would come up. Like, her parents would come home and she didn’t want to have sex with them in the house. Or they would be in the library and Frigga would send a messenger to summon Darcy for a late night lesson. Once they’d been in a gardens, getting perhaps too frisky behind some lilac bushes when Volstagg’s two young children came running through the gardens. One minute Darcy was trying to figure out Loki’s pants without looking at them and the next she was picking branches out of her hair, acting like she and Loki were simply picking flowers.

She was about ready to explode from all the build-up. So, she had a plan.

That weekend, her and Loki were going to Thryheim. She’d written Tyr, letting him know that she and Loki needed a room for an entire day and they would spend the next weekend with him. He wrote back in an overly-exasperated fashion, teasing her about her carnal desires. But Darcy knew better than to believe he held any malice in his words; Tyr was one of her most beloved friends.

Being that Darcy intended to bed the fuck out of her prince, she needed to learn what in Hel’s name his sex magic was.

Every time things moved beyond a chaste kiss (literally every time they touched) he would do something crafty with his magic, setting her nerve endings on fire, nearly pushing her over the precipice of bliss. But he wouldn’t tell her what it was, nor would he even put forth an effort to teach her. When she would ask how he came to know such tricks, he’d get all distant and broody, spitting some vague verse about a lost lover.

It was really starting to piss her off. Not that Darcy was jealous…She wasn’t jealous. But the thought that Loki had been with someone that made him nostalgic whilst in bed with her made her a little angry.

So, where did all ladies go when they believed their princes to be involved with another woman?

The brothel was a rather beautiful stone building with ivy clinging to its windows and balcony’s. Darcy wasn’t entirely familiar with it, but she’d been in there on occasion to make sure no one was mistreated. But it was lawful and clean and everyone was there of their own free will. She left satisfied, having enjoyed the company of the prostitutes as they’d spent merry time telling her of their horrible misadventures in bed over a few glasses of wine.

Now she was back and on a mission.

She stepped into the place, welcomed by the warm fragrance of perfume and cozy sight of red and gold woven tapestries. She removed her hood, approaching the counter with an air of business.

The red haired man at the desk wore a free tunic and an easy smile which was framed by his trimmed beard. “Advisor Darcy, pleasure to see you.”

“Aín,” Darcy greeted, remembering him from her previous visit, “Pleasure’s all mine.”

He quirked a grin, “Here for an inspection I presume? Congratulations on your courtship with Loki. Prince Loki, I mean.” He corrected himself with a chuckle.
Darcy smiled, “Don’t worry, I trust that nothing awful is happening. I’m actually just here to speak with the owner.”

“Of course, Advisor Darcy,” he said, flipping a page in the scheduling book before him, “Amora just finished.”

Brow furrowing, Darcy edged closer to the counter, “No, Aín, I’m not here for sex. I have business shit to do. I need to see Angrboða.”

“Of course,” he said, reaffirming his previous statement, “Amora is the new owner. Angrboða left just after…” he chuckled, “well, I’m sure you’re well aware.”

Darcy opened her mouth to tell him that she really was not aware, when a tall blonde woman in a sheer pink dress came prancing down the carpeted staircase behind the counter. Her name was Amora. Darcy remembered her as well. She’d been the one to speak of Angrboða, whom Darcy had never had the chance to meet.

“I’m starving,” Amora moaned, coming behind Aín and biting his shoulder playfully. “Would you have a meal sent to my chambers, darling?”

Aín rolled his eyes, “Of course, Milady. Mind, you have a visitor.”

Amora turned her large eyes to see Darcy standing by in her cloak. The look in Amora’s eyes surpassed joy and moved onto pure, unadulterated enthusiasm. “My gods, Advisor Darcy! How lovely to see you again!”

She came around the counter, embracing Darcy and capturing her in a rather sensual kiss. Darcy wasn’t going to lie; it was a great kiss. But she didn’t think Loki would be too thrilled with a prostitute kissing his lady. He wasn’t very tolerant of people in general. Even so, there was no trace of anything in Amora’s kiss that Darcy would qualify as anything but friendliness. There was passion and love, but nothing that suggested they were anything more than friends.

She pulled away, a brilliant smile on her heart-shaped face, “I feel like I’ve known you for a thousand years.”

“I…uh…cool.” Darcy was dumbstruck, unsure of what to do. She was unopposed to being kissed by beautiful women in the context of friendship, though she felt as though she was missing an important piece to the puzzle of this brothel.

Amora took her hand, “So, what can I help you with?”

Darcy somehow regained her cool-ish demeanor, “I’d actually just like to talk for a bit. If that’s alright…?”

“Of course,” Amora beamed, turning and gesturing for Darcy to follow her up the stairs, “Join me for a meal and a glass of wine.”

Amora led Darcy through the draped halls and closed doors of the brothel to possibly the largest room in the building. Darcy had to say it was one of the most breathtaking chambers she’d ever seen. Everything was a pale, melancholy blue, the walls decorated with a tapestry that looked somehow familiar, sofas and chaise lounges took up the larger part of the room, tables and trays were filled with perfumes and crystal decanters. A bed, larger than any Darcy had ever seen, with a flowing satin canopy occupied the other half of the room. Its sheets were messed and looked as though it were the only used thing in the room. Everything else seemed as though it had been
frozen in time years ago. Not in age or in dirt, but in stillness. The room breathed abandonment. Everything from the embellished rug to the silk black robe that was draped over the back of a chair looked as though it were waiting.

Amora paid no mind, skipping through the room to the great stone balcony that made way to by far one of the greatest views of the Asgardian skyline Darcy had ever seen. She invited Darcy to sit on one of the dark blue cushions there as they awaited the arrival of their meal. Amora made small talk and Darcy asked her questions of how her job was going and they laughed over her recent bedroom mishaps.

Lunch was vegetable soup and bread, fresh fruit, water and wine, with a side of cheese.

As they ate, Darcy tried to find a way to phrase her query as to whether or not Loki had learned sex voodoo miracles from her brothel.

“Amora,” Darcy began, sitting back against the pillar of the balcony, enjoying the feeling of the sun on her face. “is there such a thing as sex magic? It seems like there should be, I mean—”

“Oh, obviously there is!” giggled Amora, biting into a strawberry. She was sprawled on her side, ankles crossed, picking at the remnants of her meal, “I figured Loki ought to have told you that.”

“Loki—”

“He really is special, isn’t he?” Amora sighed, looking up to the sky, unaware of Darcy’s growing anxiety, “I swear, I trained him and I think he turned out better in bed than me. Everyone says so, at least. He’s the best. Of course you would know, wouldn’t you? You know, Angrboða always said that she would only leave the city when she could ‘learn to love her enemy’. The morning after she and Loki made love, she was gone. I hope she’s happier. But she was the one who taught us… Darcy?” Amora trailed off as Darcy had frozen in place, a wineglass held precariously in her hand.

Of course Loki would learn to have sex in a brothel of all places. And of course he would have sex with every prostitute. And of course Angrboða and every whore in the brothel would love him and of course he would fail to mention all of this to her. When would he even have the time to do this? It couldn’t have been after their trip out of the galaxy. He’d been too focused on trying to get himself killed.

Amora shook Darcy’s shoulder gently. When she didn’t react, she slapped her cheek. This brought Darcy out of her daze, blinking profusely, “Ow!”

The prostitute let out a sigh of relief, “Oh good, I’d thought you’d lost it. What’s the matter?”

“Loki!” Darcy growled, getting to her feet, “When was he here?”

Amora gazed up at her, “A couple years ago, I think. Time flies, you know. It was summer and he was incredibly sad. All lovesick and missing his lady.” She took in Darcy’s mix of emotions, “Didn’t he tell you?”

Darcy scowled, “No.”

She supposed that must have been the summer they spent apart when she went to Culver. That was about the time that she suspected she might have feelings for Loki before begrudgingly pushing them away. It was also around the same time that Loki started exuding sex. It all made sense now.

“Oh,” Amora said, standing up with Darcy, “Well, you must have suspected something. No sex is that good without proper training.”
Darcy groaned, her head falling into her hands.

“What?” Amora asked, shaking Darcy’s shoulders, “I don’t understand. He’s been in love with you for so long.”

Darcy groaned louder.

“Is it bad?”

“We haven’t done it!” Darcy exploded, throwing her hands in the air dramatically, spilling the entirety of her thoughts, “We’ve been almost doing it for the past month! And all I know is that he’s been using some kind of swanky sex magic that drives me bat-shit crazy and then he never finishes what he started. Never! And it is not for lack of effort on my part. I don’t know. Maybe he just wants to take it slow? But you’ve clearly met Loki; he doesn’t take things slow! And I love him and I want to fuck like there’s no tomorrow! And when I asked him how he learned sex magic he got all weird and was like ‘it would be strange to pass on that which she gave me so lovingly’ and I wanted to kill him. I’m not mad at him for having sex and not telling me about it. I’m just… sex doesn’t matter but… Argh!”

Darcy was breathing heavily by the end of her tirade, leaning over the edge of the balcony dramatically. Amora patted the lady’s back in a comforting manner. “Darcy, you worry too much, darling.”

“Do I?” Darcy grumbled, toying with an ivy leaf.

“Clearly,” Amora said, “Of course you are young and in love, I would expect nothing less.” She turned Darcy around, rubbing her arms affectionately, “You’ve no reason to be jealous of anyone.”

“I’m not jealous.” Darcy said too quickly.

Amora raised her perfect eyebrows in challenge, “Oh really? Would you then be comfortable with me recounting the things he would whisper in my ear when we were in bed? Shall I get Aín to tell you how Loki held him? Or shall I simply talk more of Angrboða? Or—”

“Alright! Alright!” Darcy conceded reluctantly, tampering down the unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach, “I get it. Loki’s a whore and I should just forget it.”

Amora gave a charming laugh, “Oh, never forget. You’ve had other lovers, have you not?”

“Yes,” Darcy grunted, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

“And did you love them as you love Loki?”

“No,” Darcy relented, “Of course not. But with Loki… How am I supposed to compete in bed with a bunch of highly trained prostitutes?”

Amora gave her a look. “Advisor Darcy, they told me you were smart.”

“Hey, I—“


Darcy rolled her eyes, “Yes, I’m listening.”

“Good, listen harder,” Amora instructed, “Coupling brings pleasure. But nothing compares to that of making love.”
“You said he made love to Angrboða.” Darcy pouted.

Amora looked nonplussed, “You really do not give up. Darcy, you never knew Angrboða, but she is no one to be envious of. She loved someone more than she could ever love anyone else, believe me.” There was a note of bitterness in Amora’s voice. She cleared her throat, leaning on the stone rail of the balcony, “And the same goes for Loki. Even then when he was vastly unaware of any feelings he had, he felt them.”

Darcy thought on what Amora had said. All in all, she was right. Darcy didn’t doubt Loki loved her unconditionally, nor did she doubt his attraction to her. She wasn’t bothered that he’d had lots of crazy passionate sex with prostitutes. She was concerned that they would be better than her. That she would be awful and he would reminisce on the sex he’d had with others besides her. Her jealousy wasn’t unreasonable.

“Amora?” Darcy started calmly, “This is going to sound stupid, but can you teach me sex magic without us having sex?”

The woman smirked, crossing her arms and looking Darcy up and down, “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Amora snickered, “How are you at resisting temptation?”

Darcy ground her teeth, “Good enough. How much magic does it require?”

“Not much.” Amora shrugged, running her fingers along Darcy’s cheekbone, sending delicious chills through her body. “What do you wish to know first?”

Darcy kept her composure, determined not to be aroused. “Just the basic theory and I can take it from there.”

Amora grinned, taking Darcy’s hands in her own, “Very well then, Advisor Darcy, come with me.”

Darcy learned everything she could and decided that she had a day to practice before Saturday when she and Loki were set to go to Thryheim. Finally, she made to return to the palace, bidding Amora a cheerful goodbye. They kissed briefly and Aín winked at her on her way out.

She made her way back to the palace, heading for the library when she stumbled into a group of ladies in the shining corridor. They didn’t notice Darcy’s approach, far too absorbed in their hushed conversation. Typically, Darcy had no desire to know the ladies’ gossip. It changed every day and was awful to keep up with. Although, it had its merit and she needed it from time to time to gain her the advantage in whatever political scheme she was developing.

She edged closer, catching her name in the mix.

“…oh please, Advisor Darcy wouldn’t.”

“She would. She’s a tramp! We’ve always known that. No family to speak of…”

“Still, she’s courting Prince Loki…”

“Not Prince Thor. She’s only worthy of the lesser, which proves the Allfather knows she’s a tramp.”

Darcy nodded in agreement, unbothered by what they had to say. It was typical of them to talk shit
just to have something to do. Darcy would admit it was endlessly entertaining to talk shit about someone you disliked.

“Volla let him bed her…”

“…we all remember that, Greta…”

“…wouldn’t shut up about it, would she?”

“Volla was so chaste! If he could get to her, no doubt he’s already taken his Advisor.”

“Or she’s taken him. Have you seen her? I’m surprised she’s working in the palace rather than in the brothel.”

The ladies laughed and Darcy chimed in falsely, “I bet she just took Prince Loki to bed and that’s why she’s in her position.”

The ladies didn’t even notice it was Darcy who spoke and she was evermore irked by this. Finally, when they stopped giggling, one of them sighed melodramatically.

“…I bet he’s not even faithful to her. Remember Lorelei?”

Darcy froze. No she sure as Hel did not remember Lorelei. That bitch was evil and everybody knew it. What was this about Loki and Lorelei?

“Right you are, Mérida. Though Lorelei is easy, don’t you think?”

“Of course she is. But she seduced the Prince. And a little bird told me she just went to do it again not a few moments ago in the library.”

Darcy nearly burst into a tiny, million pieces. Lorelei. Really. Walking lightly and meaningfully down the hall, Darcy made up her mind that she would not be angry. No. She was a lady and she was above fighting over a man with a bunch of petty women. No, she was going to handle this like the smooth-talking advisor she was.

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Late afternoon, Loki was sitting in the library, wondering idly where Darcy was. Admittedly, things had been a bit boring on Asgard and the only thing that was keeping his mind adequately occupied were thoughts of just how thoroughly he was going to bed his lady when he got the chance.

He watched Jörmungandr and Fenrir sleep beside him, thinking that they were rather cute. They were like his children and often they made it difficult for he and Darcy to do anything especially explicit. He felt bad asking them to leave whenever their kisses became heated and breathy. It seemed that whenever he had Darcy had the opportunity to relish in one another, they were interrupted.

Loki was absolutely certain in his desire to bed Darcy. He’d never felt such attraction for anyone in his life. It was like a burning, irresistible magnetism that drew him to her. Though, there was something close to trepidation that lingered in him. He was not concerned as to whether or not he’d be able to bring her pleasure. He knew he could. But rather, how coupling might affect their relationship. Would things change? For better or worse, he couldn’t be sure, but he was uneasy about their future.
He pushed the thought from his head, easing back in his chair and continuing to read a rather large Elven novel about an enchantress hero and her sister, a master swordswoman. It was an entertaining read and Loki wondered why he’d never come across it before. Well written and a valuable story, he speculated when he would be able to visit Alfheim. It was ill-advised to enter any of their cities without some kind of invitation. Even as a prince of Asgard, it would be incredibly improper of him.

His thoughts dwelled on this for a moment and he allowed his mind to wander, following golden dust motes with his eyes and enjoying the comfortable afternoon warmth on his face. With a gentle sweep of magic, he made the dust dance. Intricate ribbons formed from flecks of dirt, each moving with the air in the room, tracing the Fenrir’s snores and the tired flicks of Jörmungandr’s tail. At last, he let the dust fall as he heard the approaching footsteps of a lady.

Loki sat back in his chair, expecting Lady Asta to tell him that she was heading out for the day. He was unpleasantly surprised by none other than Lady Lorelei. She wore a delicate green dress and her hair was down in springy ringlets, her eyes were overflowing with malcontent and malicious intentions.

“Prince Loki,” she greeted him with a low curtsy, “an honor, as always.”

Loki thought to tell her to go away, but paying her attention would only encourage her. Instead, he went back to his book, completely ignoring that she existed. In truth, his feelings toward Lorelei were truly of dislike. He felt nothing quite as passionate as hatred, but rather her presence made him ill. Her perfume reminded him of acid and her very essence hurt him. She was a reminder of the lowest point he’d ever reached. She had been the gateway to many near-death experiences, for he believed after coupling with Lorelei, she would be his last. A bitter fuck to pair with a bitter end.

Alas, he survived even his lengthiest of melodramas and perilous adventures. And Lorelei was still here to take more from him.

He heard her approach and held up a hand to stop her. He needed this to end.

“Stop.”

She didn’t. Instead, she stroked his hand, holding it between her long, spindly fingers. “Why?”

“I don’t want you here. Now or ever.” He said harshly, tearing his hand away. But that only encouraged her to step closer, playing with the ends of his hair.

“You said something similar the last time,” she hummed, “and yet…”

She made to extend her touch, but Loki jerked his head away. He would have grabbed her wrist, but physical contact wasn’t something he wanted to condone at this point. He was prepared to magically take himself elsewhere when someone cleared their throat rather obviously. However, the clearing of their throat became a full on cough which lasted several seconds.

Loki turned to see Darcy standing at the end of the shelves, hands on her hips, staring daggers at Lorelei. She seemed oddly complacent.

Loki expected some kind of shame or resentment from Lorelei, but the blasted lady only grinned in the most sinister way, not moving from her spot beside him.

“Advisor Darcy,” she said, “a pleasure to see you.”

Darcy said nothing at all, she just stood there. Waiting.
Lorelei, after several moments of silence, decided she ought to go. She strut past Darcy, whispering something in her ear as she left. Darcy was unphased as she waited till Lorelei was out of earshot to break her domineering pose.

Loki stared, noting how breathtakingly gorgeous his lady was when she was furious. Her face was flushed and she wore a golden dress that displayed her breasts quite magnificently.

“What’s her deal?” Darcy queried, kneeling beside their sleeping pets, giving each a loving scratch on the head.

Feeling as though he needed to explain himself, Loki marked his place in his book and closed it. He stood up, staring out the window at the endless Asgardian sky. “She wants what she knows she cannot have, yet retains hope for chance of feasting on my weakness.”

Darcy snorted in a rather unladylike fashion, taking the seat across from his. “You gave her a reason to keep coming though.” She said, putting her feet up on the seat of his chair.

Loki sat down as well, pulling her feet into his lap and massaging her ankles. “I would not have done it if I believed she would ever have the opportunity to try again. I especially never would have done it if I knew that you and I would ever be together as we are. I admit it was only after I had conjured the idea that you could never love me as I loved you, and after I figured myself a danger to you that she came to me and I accepted her advances. It was reckless and childish, borne of self-pity and loathing of which I hardly had any reason. Her presence now is naught but consequence for my actions. But know that I never once thought on her. I never sought her out, liked her or wanted her.” He paused, the silence augmenting his words to come, “I never loved her.”

A blush crept onto Darcy’s cheeks and she turned away, staring out the window for a long moment. She looked back at him, a smirk on her pretty, full lips. “Put a cork in it, Lokes. I’m not jealous of Lorelei. She’s a woman who acts like a kid with daddy issues and you hate that because you have enough daddy issues as is.”

This took an entirely different turn than Loki had expected and he scowled. “I do not have ‘daddy issues’.”

Darcy cocked a brow at him and he made a face.

“I never said you were jealous of her,” Loki pointed out, detecting some kind of lie in Darcy’s statement.

“Yeah, but it sounded like you were trying to reassure me. You fit in a dramatic pause just before reiterating that you loved me.” Darcy countered cleverly, yet defensively.

Loki met her eyes in a challenge, and suddenly they were playing The Game.

The Game happened ever so often when one of them told a petty lie or was keeping something small from the other. It could end in several different ways. One of them would usually give in after a few witty jabs. And sometimes it went on and on until the other figured it out.

“Actually,” Loki said, rubbing his thumb around a rather tender spot on her ankle. “I felt it was necessary to explain why there was a lady making rather dreadful attempts at seducing me. I thought it only reasonable to remind you that I love you. Why so quick to assume jealousy? Unless you are jealous of course.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes, “I just told you I wasn’t jealous of her and you should know of all people
that I’m not lying.”

Loki tapped her leg with his finger, thinking. “You tried to divert from your jealousy by saying I have daddy issues, which I continue to deny. You gave a similarity between Lorelei and myself because you are…embittered? Or perhaps just to tease me, further deflecting from the true problem at hand: your jealousy.”

Fenrir let out a rather loud snore, causing them both to look over briefly before continuing their discussion in hushed tones.

“Do you really think I’m going to be jealous of a girl that has spent years developing a plot to becoming Queen of Asgard?” Darcy asked, glaring at him as he smoothed his palms up her skirts, kneading the muscles of her calves.

“Honestly, my love, I’m still not sure how your mind works,” Loki sighed, trying very hard to ignore his growing arousal. “But perhaps you’re right and I’ve misinterpreted your feelings. You’re not jealous…”

“Oh course not.”

“…of Lorelei.” Loki finished, getting to his knees between Darcy’s legs, her silken skirt falling around her waist as he draped her leg over his shoulder, bringing that which he desired closer. “Tell me, darling, who inspired your envy?”

This all caught Darcy off guard and he relished in having rendered her speechless if even for a few seconds, “Loki, we can’t. Frank and Fen….”

She trailed off as her traced the seams of her undergarments with his fingers, her breaths shallow, her skin flushed and she kept her eyes on his.

“I could stop,” Loki suggested nonchalantly, gently caressing her through the fabric, “just tell me who you’re jealous of. Or did you not want me to stop?”

Darcy seemed in the midst of great indecision which only worsened when Loki began placing chaste kisses where she needed the most attention. Fenrir snored again and Darcy bit back a moan.

“You wouldn’t,” she challenged.

“God of Mischief.” He reminded her, and with a wink her panties vanished.

“Well, God of Mischief,” Darcy breathed, her toes curling as Loki kissed her thighs, kneading her flesh in hand, “It seems as though you’ve met your match. I’m Mortal of Stubbornness. I don’t care how many prostitutes taught you how to ‘make love’, I’m not giving it…oh fuck.”

Loki wasn’t sure her profanity was due to the fact that she just gave away all that she had been hoping to keep from him, or that he had finally given her what they both deeply wanted. Loki had put no restraint on his enthusiasm, savoring Darcy’s struggle to keep quiet, they were in a library after all. And just when he felt her legs start to quiver and her fingers tightened in his hair, he stopped, having heard approaching footsteps.

Darcy gave him an agonized look as he hastily sat back in his chair, pulling her skirt back down as he went. He fixed his hair and Darcy adjusted her dress, hastily wiping the mess off his face.

Lady Asta came to the end of the shelves, a kind smile on her face, “Prince Loki, Advisor Darcy,” she bowed her head, “I have a message from Queen Frigga.”
Loki held out his hand and accepted the letter with a nod of thanks. Lady Asta left and Loki was sure Darcy was about to scream. “I’m going to explode.”

He read the message from his mother bitterly, “You had better keep yourself together. My mother requests our presence.”

She stretched, letting out a frustrated groan while Loki watched her, wondering how long it would take for him to take her here and now.

“Do you wanna do it in behind a tapestry on the way there?” Darcy asked and Loki didn’t think she was completely serious.

Loki smirked, standing up and offering her his arm, “Well, I’ve never done that with a prostitute.”

Darcy scowled, giving him a punch before accepting his arm. “I bet you haven’t.”

“Aw, Darling, are you quite jealous?” he teased, further nettling her. “I swear, it was purely educational.”

She grumbled something unintelligible under her breath and Loki kissed her temple, “How did you find out?”

Darcy looked up at him smarmily, “‘Where did I learn sex magic, Darling? From no one. A lost soul, scattered across Yggdrasil. I would search for her, but lo! She is the stars.’” She said in a rather interesting interpretation of his voice.

“And you assumed that meant prostitutes?” Loki queried, interested in her thought process.

She shrugged as they exited the library, “Eh, it was more of a guess. You really romanticized Angrboða, and what’s more romanticized than good sex?”

Loki chuckled, kissing her knuckles as they walked past a group of ladies, “Are you truly jealous?”

She rolled her eyes, a blush once more creeping onto her cheeks, “Not very. But only because you felt more a need to assure me of Lorelei than a group of raging sex gods and goddesses.”

“Only because I don’t foresee ever having another encounter with them. Lorelei I feel may try to instigate something.” He explained and Darcy pouted, her blush deepening in shade.

“Darcy, you know I love you—“

She groaned, shoving him away, “You’re really the most annoying little shit that ever walked my way, you know that?”

He repressed a grin, looking down at her with what she called ‘puppy-eyes’, “Do you love me even so?”

“Unfortunately.” She stated shortly, allowing him to take her in his arms.

They kissed again, the touch of her lips exiling any other thought from his mind. He was reminded of their purpose in the hall only when Darcy pulled away. “We’ve gotta go see your mom.”

***

The last thing Darcy wanted to do was sit through another meeting concerning her motion to make a cut from the military funds to assist Vanaheim in cleaning up the collateral that had been caused
during the Bjarte Battle, as people had taken to calling it. Most of the court was in agreement that they should accept responsibility for their actions. People were arguing now about where they should take the money from. Everyone was forever reluctant to subtract any money whatsoever from the military funds, but Darcy suspected they would relent and side with her in the end.

Loki’s presence at the meeting gave her that confidence. He had hardly said anything throughout the entire decision making process, but somehow he’d managed to convince over half of the people that initially disagreed with Darcy to side with her. Darcy blamed his silvertongue; its power could convince a sponge to fly.

Thoughts of Loki’s tongue diverted Darcy’s attention drastically away from the meeting and to the devilishly handsome prince beside her. He sat regally, slouching in his chair, legs spread and expression bored. She knew he was only sitting through this to make her happy. Plus, as soon as they got out, they were going to Thryheim at last.

After attempting to practice sex magic alone, she realized that she didn’t have enough energy to do it. The second she began, she felt light-headed and no sooner fell unconscious. So, she bitterly resigned once more to the fact that she was magically indisposed.

Darcy figured the ladies of the court would have a field day if they knew the dirty thoughts swimming around in her head. She was going to totally ruin her prince as soon as she could get him alone and naked. The previous afternoon she’d experienced for the first time just how talented Loki was when it came to sex. Yes, he had used oral sex to coax information out of her. But was it the hottest thing she’d ever experienced? Without a doubt. Mischief knew how to handle the downstairs.

Her eyes raked over him, from the sharp and dignified lines of his face, down the column of his throat and across the plains of his armored chest, lingering on his legs. She flicked her gaze back to his face to find him staring right back at her. The tension between them increased to ungodly heights and she could have sworn the temperature in the room rose about ten degrees.

But Darcy kept her wits about her. Frigga had given them a rather long talk the other day about the implications of their courtship and how they were to act in public if they were to retain any of the dignity they’d managed to assume throughout Darcy’s time as advisor. One scandal and it would make life rather difficult.

As well aware of this as Darcy was, she couldn’t help but bite her lip and let her gaze drop momentarily to Loki’s lap. His everyday armor was enough to conceal any semblance of arousal he may possess, but she knew it was there.

Struggling to keep her breathing even, she brought her attention back to the meeting to cast her final vote. The majority of the high court raised their hands in favor of Darcy’s proposal and at long last, the meeting was finished. Finally, she relaxed, standing up and taking Loki’s arm. Her hand was slipped in the crook of his elbow. Nothing uncouth or scandalous about that. They walked from the meeting room, maintaining civil composure until they turned a corner into an empty stone corridor that faced a secluded section of the gardens.

Loki pushed her against a wall rather abruptly, taking little to no time whatsoever to bring his lips down on hers. Darcy responded only too enthusiastically, wrapping her leg around his, trying to get more of his body on hers. Should they really be making out in plain sight of anyone that came around the corner? Probably not. Was it worth it? Hell yeah.

The sun was beginning to set and Darcy could hear crickets in the garden, they chirps doing little to mask the sounds of her and Loki’s excitement. At last she came up for air and Loki took the
opportunity to kiss her neck.

“Loki,” she said, her breath catching as his bit the skin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.
“Loki, we have to go.”

He paid her no mind, slipping the sleeve of her gown off her shoulder, trailing kisses lower.

“Loki,” she tried again, giving him a nudge.

He relented, a look of his annoyance on his face, “Darling, I’m preoccupied.”

“Mhm,” she agreed, adjusting her dress and feeling the bruise he left on her neck, “I got that. But imagine this: we’re in a hall. Anyone could pass by and I would have committed political suicide.”

He pouted, tracing her clavicle longingly, “I would never let us get caught. You know that.”

Darcy held back a smirk. She knew Loki was cleverer than letting someone walk in on them, but she still felt the need to be careful. “I know. But we’ll be expected at dinner unless we leave for Thryheim now.”

Mischief flashed in Loki’s green eyes and Darcy almost threw her underwear out the window. He was just that good. “We had best get going.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, glancing around, “Where are Frank and Fenrir?”

Right on cue, the snake and dog came hurdling around the corner, a rather thick slab of raw meat hanging from Fenrir’s maw. Darcy frowned down at them, “I hope that was given to you and you didn’t just steal it.”

The animals did nothing but look at her, happily wagging their tails.

Loki chuckled, taking her hand, “Shall we take Hel?”

They ultimately did end up riding Hel all the way to Thryheim that night. She was faster than any longship and she was infinitely better company. The entire time she tried her best to ignore Frank and Fenrir prancing around her feet and traveling too far off the path, but in the end she would always neigh after them or stomp her hooves in warning. Darcy thought it was rather adorable.

Tyr was waiting for them when they arrived, alongside none other than Lady Sif, his beloved sister.

“Darcy! Loki!” he called, running to greet them as soon as they’d dismounted. Before he could hug them, however, he was floored by Frank and Fenrir, who were more than happy to see Tyr again. They absolutely adored him and Darcy suspected it had something to do with the amount of treats he had a propensity for giving out.

Sif was adorned in a simple tunic and pants, looking happier than Darcy had ever seen her. She helped her brother up and scratched Fenrir and Franks heads, before hugging Darcy and sending Loki a half-smile. “I had not known you two were coming.” She said friendly, “We could have traveled together.”

“We should have, but Loki and I were caught up in the most meticulous meeting,” Darcy said, happy to see her friends again, “Did Sigyn come as well? I haven’t seen her in days.”

Sif rolled her eyes fondly, “Her apprenticeship has her working so frequently now. She loves it
more than me, I think.”

Tyr laughed heartily at this, “Oh, as if she could ever love anything more than you.” He sighed, wiping tears of laughter out of his eyes, “Now, Darcy, Loki, we tried to wait for you before we ate, but, well, you took too damn long to get here so we ate without you. Additionally, I have a bet with my dear sister that I can beat her in a late night spar. I imagine you two are rather tired from your journey, so I won’t make you watch, but we are still accepting last minute bets?”

They entered Tyr’s castle as he talked cheerily, pausing with open palms as if to accept money.

Darcy looked to her prince and he smirked, “I could get in trouble for gambling away royal money.” He dropped some coins into Tyr’s hand, “Ten on Sif.”

Tyr scowled in good nature, “Well, I see who his faith resides in.”

Chuckling, Darcy pulled her cloak tighter around herself, surprised at how cold she was. Although spring had taken Asgard with its usual strength, the brisk winds on the way over and the cool night had chilled Darcy’s core. Tyr, the sweetheart that he was, took notice and he smiled warmly, “I think you two could use a bit of warming up. Come, I shall show you to your rooms.”

***

Loki was grateful that Tyr had given them separate rooms in the presence of Sif. Although they all knew that Loki was as likely to stay in his own bed as any man when his lover was just down the hall, it was important that they keep up the pretense of chastity. Not for his sake, but Darcy’s. It had taken her so long to gain the level of respect she had throughout the Asgardian court. The men were so thick brained that one toe out of line and Darcy would be dubbed a senseless bitch in heat, as if they’d never been with unmarried women before.

He waited in his chambers for a few moments, calming his nerves.

Loki would not say he was nervous. No. Why would he be? He was quite familiar with sex and Darcy was everything he ever wanted. She was his best friend, his closest companion, and the woman he loved. He’d scarcely been able to keep his mind off the thought of bedding her for the past several months. So why now should his anxieties reveal themselves?

He paced the room, breathing deeply as he did so. There was nothing to fear. He loved Darcy and she loved him. He was being ridiculous. Without further hesitation, he waved his hand to transport himself to Darcy’s chambers.

It was warmer there. A fire was burning and Darcy sat in a cushioned den beside the hearth, her curvaceous figured nestled comfortably between several pillows and blankets. She had changed from her dress into a simple silver robe and was now staring deep into the flames. Slowly, Loki approached the fireside, taking a seat behind his advisor.

She said nothing to him, but acknowledged his presence by leaning into his chest, turning her face to the side to inhale his scent. Loki quirked the tiniest of grins, his anxieties beginning to melt away by the warmth of her affections.

Ever so gently, he began running his fingers through her hair, undoing the twists and braids her maids had styled earlier that day. It was routine for Loki to let out Darcy’s hair, to play with it and braid it. But tonight he left it free, so the thick waves of chestnut hair was free, the occasional strand being wafted gently by the heat of the nearby flames. Pushing the locks aside, Loki began to kiss her neck, his heart clenching with tender excitement at every chill his lips sent through her.
Eventually, she turned in his arms to press her lips against his, her movements unhurried and sure.

This is how Loki wanted it to be. This was the heart of their relationship. They could tease and make-fun, laugh and cry, fight and disengage, but in the end, there was something about how they could just exist together that completely blew his mind. Being with Darcy was effortless. It was as if an invisible cord of unfathomable strength bound him and Darcy together. In that moment, he had no doubt that they would be together forever. They would forever be a force to be reckoned with, no matter how far apart they were, no matter what happened to either of them, they would find a way to be together. Be it friends or lovers, they were bound.

Darcy pulled away, a crease between her brows. Loki smoothed the line, holding her close, “What’s wrong, darling?”

Shaking her head, she threaded her fingers in his hair, staring profoundly into his eyes, “I just got the strangest feeling. Like, the-planets-have-all-aligned-and-this-is-fate-giving-me-a-message type feeling.”

Loki swallowed the lump in his throat and kissed her softly, “I have felt the very same.”

Darcy had no response but to keep kissing him, the passionate capture of her lips igniting every cell in his body. Soon, she cut their connection once more. Sitting back on her heels between his legs, she began to remove his armor piece by piece. It was a slow process and Loki hardly ever bothered to manually put on his armor. But there was something rather intimate about having Darcy take off his clothes. Ever so slowly, she was taking apart his armor, his shields, exposing him and making him vulnerable. And he was letting her.

Because if he could not be vulnerable to Darcy, then this was not the life he was meant to be living.

When he was stripped down to nothing but his pants, he slipped his fingers through the loose knot that held her robe together and was moved by the fact that she wore nothing beneath. He pushed the robe off her shoulders, his body bursting from a low simmer into a heated blaze. Darcy sat between his legs, bare and warm, her skin flush and her lips pink and perfect. And she was all for him.

He leaned forward, taking her in his arms, carefully lowing her to the soft bedding beneath them. He kissed her everywhere he could reach. Her lips, her cheeks, her throat, her breasts, her stomach…

Darcy stopped him there, grabbing his arms and pulling him back to her lips.

“Later,” She said, reaching between them to loosen the fastenings of his pants.

“Later,” he agreed, ridding himself of both his boots and pants with magic.

Loki watched Darcy’s face morph with pleasure as he entered her bit by bit. He nearly whimpered at the feel of her, unbelieving that one painfully clever and precious little mortal could feel so divine.

“Darcy, you’re exquisite,” he moaned. His head fell into the crook of her neck, indulging in tiny thrusts, relishing in Darcy’s lovely gasps as he stayed deep within her.

“Loki,” she breathed, her voice high-pitched and riddled with emotion, “you feel so good.”

He lifted his head to kiss her soundly, flicking his tongue against hers and catching her sighs of pleasure as he moved faster. From beneath him she pushed her hips towards his, meeting his
thrusts and increasing the friction between them. Suddenly, it was as if he desired nothing else in the world but to see Darcy come apart by his doing. It was his singular goal to watch her face as he made her feel as she never has before.

“Darcy,” he said her name, worshipping her with his body. He pulled her legs higher around his waist so he could get deeper, allowing him to reach a spot that made her cry out in ecstasy, her back arching and fingers knotting in her hair. He couldn’t help the wave of pride that surged through him as he quickened his pace. He’d never felt so much all at once, even in the absence of magic, Darcy gave him more than he’d ever had. She was so soft and welcoming and he was going to lose himself quickly if he didn’t stay focused.

“Loki,” Darcy panted, her breathless voice a whisper as she spoke over his lips. “I want…to feel you.”

Loki’s sex addled mind took a moment to understand her, but then he felt a spark of magic enter his consciousness as Darcy projected herself onto him. The sensation of her was so full that he hardly had time to take her hand and do the same before he got lost in her entirely. She physically enveloped him as her bliss radiated through his mind, becoming his own. He overwhelmed him in their connection, his movements becoming quicker and erratic.

Darcy cried his name as she began to tremble around him, her body giving into his dedicated attentions. Her orgasm washed over them both; body undulating and shaking around him and empty pleasure sweeping through her mind, the power of her finish was enough to push Loki over the edge.

“Darcy,” he all but sobbed her name, his head falling against her shoulder as he came.

Nothing could compare to the feeling of pure contentment he felt, secure in Darcy’s arms, her breasts pressed against his chest, her beautiful legs cradling his hips, holding him inside her while they shared a series of slow and compassionate kisses.

Darcy sighed complacently against his lips, as he withdrew his magic from her. She did the same before smiling up at him, tired and happy and satisfied, “I love you, Loki.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, turning them over so she could sprawl across his chest, “And I, you, Darcy Lewis.”

She laughed softly, kissing him again. “We should probably go to bed. Gods know what time Tyr is going to get us up tomorrow.”

Loki chuckled, glancing mischievously at the bed, “I agree, we should most definitely go to bed.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes, “Loki…”

But before she knew it, Loki had magicked them the short distance to the bed and was already trailing a series of rough kisses down her neck. He was still hard inside her and gave a few gentle thrusts that stole any words Darcy might have had for him in the immediate. Loki could tell she was trying and failing to resist him, but her body betrayed her.

Finally she pulled away from his lips, sitting in an upright position, consequently setting him deeper inside her. She took an even breath before speaking, “Loki, it’s late. We can’t just spend all day in bed tomorrow.”

Loki cocked a smug brow at her in challenge, “Oh really?”
“Yes, really.” Darcy said, plainly upset by what she believed to be the truth.

Loki narrowed his eyes, staring into her large blue ones as he sat up, “Darling, you are sadly mistaken if you think either of us is leaving this room tomorrow for any reason at all.” He squeezed her ass, slowly coaxing her to movement, “I’ve been thinking about naught but you, naked and in my bed for months, Darcy. I’ve thought about you in every possible position, every way I cold make you come completely and utterly undone.” He brought his lips to her jaw as he spoke, entrapping her further with every word, “I’m going to make that little shake you had by the fire look like mere quiver compared to what I’m going to do, Darcy Lewis.”

He could feel Darcy’s heart racing in excitement as she turned her gaze upon him, unadulterated lust clouding the crystal blue of her irises. “Is that a promise, Loki Odinson?”

“I swear it,” he said, holding out his pinky.

Darcy linked their pinkies, rocking her hips against his, making him gasp.

“Minx,” he accused, biting her lip, “Gods, I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, a self-satisfied grin on her face, “Now, I believe you have a promise to keep.”

Loki nearly growled, making his lady laugh as they made love into the bright hours of daybreak. And when they finally laid down to rest, Darcy cuddled up against his side, her cheek on his chest, he realized Angrboða was right. Nothing could compare to making love to Darcy, no magic or fight. No accomplishment would ever be greater than that moment of knowing that he had loved and had been loved in return.

***

Iðunn awoke with a start, suddenly acutely aware of another familiar magical presence nearby. Excitement tore at her chest as she didn’t believe it could be so. She’d hoped for years and years for her to come by again, but she never had. Her friend had been so distant after the war.

She stood from her bed, waving a hand to cast light throughout her home as she hurried down the stairs and went to stand in her orchard in the center of the three trees that were budding great golden apple blossoms. Iðunn stared off into the dark forest sensing the presence of another.

“I know you’re there,” Iðunn chided, “It’s been too long, dear friend. Come see me.”

A voice came from the dark, as low and as beautiful as it had always been. Yet, it was so much sadder this time…so incredibly sad, “I have changed, Iðunn. I fear you will not recognize me.”

“Phht,” Iðunn made the sound with an air of disbelief, “I can hear you just find Angrboða. I know you’ve changed, now come out of the damn forest and embrace me you wild woman.”

Iðunn hadn’t known what to expect of her old friend. She hadn’t seen her since she’d handed over the stone of time, the key to her success with the apples. They’d kept up in letters for a long while, but they stopped after the Great War. Angrboða told her of having gone through a permanent change in order to stay safe when Asgard invaded Nidavellir, but Iðunn was not prepared for what she saw now.

Angrboða’s skin, which had at one time been the softest, palest blue, was now as black as charcoal. The lines, the crest of her family and symbols of her homeland had been destroyed, leaving her skin flat and unmarked. The bright, heart-warming red that Iðunn once gazed into to find cheer was
black and mourning. Her hair had stayed the same and this brought Íðunn a considerable amount of joy. The precious dark locks were still in place and still as curly as ever. She remembered the days when her Frost Giant friend would complain about the tangles and mess they would make. Íðunn was willing to bet that now she treasured every last one.

What further surprised Íðunn was that Angrboða wore her traditional armor. Not the pieces that her husband had made her all those years ago, but her armor from Jotunheim. Green and shaped like treacherous ice, the pieces sheltered Angrboða’s body, keeping her from further harm.

“Oh, Angrboða,” Íðunn breathed, reaching out to her friend and taking her in a secure hug. It was a bit funny how they had to embrace, for Angrboða was really quite tall and Íðunn was especially short even by Asgardian standards. Angrboða bent down and Íðunn stood on her toes, the smaller woman expressing her sentiments fondly, “Oh, how I’ve missed you. Though I hear you’ve been an outright whore.”

Angrboða laughed and Íðunn smiled, for the mirth of friendship was truly the greatest thing of all. And Angrboða’s laugh could charm herd of raging bilgesnipe. It was ever so magical.

“You are not wrong, Íðunn,” Angrboða affirmed, gazing around the orchard.

Íðunn finally released her friend, gazing up at her ponderously, “What brings you to me now, old friend? After all that has happened?”

“Many things,” Angrboða sighed, looking up at the sky, her brows coming together, “It has been long, and I admit that for a while I dared not face you, Íðunn. I had lost everyone and I felt as though I may lose you as well. So I kept away. But I have learned to forgive not a few years ago. I’ve been traveling, trying to make myself useful somehow.”

Íðunn nodded in encouragement, “Well, I’m glad you came to me at last. Shall we go drink? I’m not quite so young as I used to be, but I can still drink quite well, I assure you.”

Chuckling, Angrboða ruffled Íðunn’s hair with her large hand, “Of course, dear friend. I never doubted you. But before we go in, I must tell you, there is another reason why I am here.”

“Go on,” Íðunn said, crossing her arms curiously.

Again, Angrboða looked to the stars, “I have felt an awakening in our stone.”

Íðunn’s eyes widened, “An awakening? How could this be?”

“I buried it with my blood,” Angrboða explained heavily, “My family lies with it. And so I feel it’s pulse. But something has happened. It stirs and unless found by the right souls, I fear chaos.”

Íðunn sat down on the grass, taking in what she heard as if it were nothing more than a prediction of the weather. “I see. And do you think that should be us?”

“Not by any means,” Angrboða stated surely, “I vowed to never return to that place and it is my vow that restrains me from going now. You would not do well to go without me. Besides, I daresay we are not the ones who should see it now. We have had enough of Time, don’t you think?”

Íðunn narrowed her eyes at her friend, “You speak as though you have someone in mind.”

“I do indeed,” Angrboða confessed, sitting down next to her friend, “I have felt it. There are two of them. They are ones who know of the ancient celestial’s power, ones who have faced it and
survived and continue to live.”

“Spit it out already,” Íðunn demanded impatiently, “You always did have the need to add drama to everything.”

Angrboða smirked at her friend, “Are you familiar with Prince Loki and his Advisor?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so, it's been a while. But I'm not dead! Woo. I'm fine. I just moved to NYC and started my new life that has stolen literally every ounce of free time. But I choked out this chapter and I hope you enjoyed it. I'm going to elaborate on a couple things really fast, per the usual.

So, Something that occurred to me while writing this was that I cut across a lot of time between when Darcy and Loki get together at the end of the summer to when they finally have sex the following spring. I was talking with my friend, and we figured they could have had sex before then. I decided against this because I wanted to give Darcy and Loki time to be together. They had been friends for so long, then had feelings for each other before Loki decided that he couldn't be with Darcy and then they went to war. It was a whole lot of mess, so I wanted to give them some time to just exist for a bit. Don't rush into things. Take time. All that jazz.

Just to clarify, Darcy has never done anything with anyone at a brothel. I don't know why I had to say that, just figured I should.

I don't actually have all that more to say about this piece. I do, however, want to apologize for my absence. I promise to try harder to update more frequently. Thank you so much for reading. Feel free to ask me questions or tell me what you think or whatever.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!