In an attempt to rein in the son that remains to her after Thor's banishment, Frigga arranges a marriage between two old friends in the hopes that they can work together to heal an eroded realm. On Earth, a prince searches for identity after his world is turned upside-down. And in the darkness, something stirs.

This would not be here if it weren't for my wonderful muse Ammay, who keeps me writing when all I want to do is wallow in a maelstrom of feelings and not actually put words out. Half of what goes on and will go on in this story is because of her.

I diverge from canon between the huge gigantic lie that Loki indulges in when he goes to talk to Thor on Midgard during Thor's Worst Day Ever, and his trip to Jotunheim to recruit Laufey to kill Odin. I've used some of the names from mythology because they look cool and sound cool especially for locations (halls, rooms in the palace, etc), but I'm not going to draw too heavily on it, or on the comics. Half the time I'm making things up as I go along, anyway...
chirality; describing an asymmetrical form, as a molecule, that cannot be superimposed on its mirror image.
Chirality

It was not so long ago, she thought, that the great throne hall of Gladsheim had been full of the worthies of Asgard for another coronation. That day they had been roaring, stamping their feet, clapping their hands in delight under the flapping red-and-gold banners of the brother who would have been Crown Prince. Now, they still cheered, but even her ears could pick out the discordant note, the sound of uncertainty. Things had happened so quickly – too quickly – were still happening at a speed that made Sif wonder just how far they would plummet until at last they were caught and stopped.

“Are you ready?”

She looked up from where she’d been examining her shadowy reflection in the polished stone floor (fitting that what she could see was darkness, they seemed close to falling into it) and looked over at her queen. If she would smile for nothing else today, she would smile for Frigga, who only sought to keep the realms she loved so dearly intact.

It was a good plan they had hatched, too. If it worked, it would be an even better plan.

“I am, my queen,” she replied. Sif did not fidget, or fuss with her outfits. She had broken herself of these nervous tics one by one, not wanting to give away any tells to those who were not her friends. But the urge to fuss with the plaited cloth-and-leather that wound up her arms under gold bracers was strong, the desire to smooth unusually sweaty palms over thighs covered by a dress made of the finest fabrics in any of the nine realms almost enough to make her give in.

Almost, but not quite. Sif was a warrior of Asgard, a shield-maiden who had proved wrong all those who dared say she was unworthy to carry her glaive and shield and unworthy to serve the king. She would not let herself break that image, that knowledge of herself, on this or any day. Frigga, though, had an uncanny sense for when someone was in distress and simply smiled at her, resting a hand on Sif’s arm lightly.

“It will be all right,” she said. “Nobody will have anything ill to say of you or your bravery on this day.”

“This is not the sort of valor I had hoped for, my lady.”

“I know.” Frigga let her hand drop and took a breath, and Sif watched as the woman’s shoulders came back and the head that had been bowed under the apparent weight of a diadem cunningly wrought in the shape of a heron’s crest lifted proudly. Before her stood a queen, where before had been a woman. “But it is still valorous to do what you have agreed to, do not doubt that. And never doubt that I love and care about you as though you are one of my own.”

“Truly, I will be one of your own ere long,” Sif replied, and they both laughed, the sound too nervous in the cavernous space.

“Do you remember?”

“When you have taken your place on the dais,” Sif recited. “I will go to the top of the ledge, wait a full breath, and then approach. Slow, measured steps, not…” she recalled the words Frigga had used before “…galloping ahead like a warhorse.”

“Just as we practiced,” Frigga reminded her. “Remember to breathe.”
Then Tyr was approaching to escort the queen through the curtains to the heart of Gladsheim, and
with a last smile Frigga vanished through them, and Sif was left behind. A breeze stirred the cloth
lazily and she approached unto the final set, weighted so they did not billow so much. Though the
ridge of stairs before her blocked most of her sight she could see the throne dais. She really did not
need to; quiet settled on the hall as soon as Frigga, regal as ever, took her place.

Her head buzzed as she ascended the steps between the antechamber opening and the ledge that
ringed this part of the hall, where only the peerage could stand. Above, in two and three tiers, were
others who had privilege enough to be nominally in Gladsheim but not so close. Arrayed outside –
behind her, stretching far out into the parade courtyard before the palace, were the many thousands
who had assembled this day. Sif had stood before them all, but never like this – never in a silk gown
embroidered heavily in green and gold, with the gold ceremonial armor and the whole trappings of
what she was to become hence. But she schooled her face and paused on the ledge, as a sigh rippled
through the assembly. Frigga had spoken truly; she looked the part, if she was in turmoil inside.

The rustling approval grew as she made her way to the dais, but Sif looked neither left nor right, she
held her head high, and focused only on the green cape rippling down from the shoulders of the one
she would take her place beside. His banners flew from the heights today alongside the scarlet-and-gold
of the house of Odin, green and gold and bearing his sigil, and placed above the flag of the
realm – the king was in residence, it said. Sif remembered her etiquette lessons, though she’d taken
them but hatefully at first, then less so at Frigga’s gentle insistence.

She was at the base of the dais now, though – when had she reached it? When she had stood above it
the aisle had seemed to go on for leagues. And now she was at the base of it and ascending, and
reaching up to lightly slip her hand into Loki’s. Sif took small pleasure in seeing his own indicators
in the way his throat worked as he looked at her, his eyes unable to (or perhaps allowed not to)
clamp down quite fast enough on the flicker of approval and something else, something less
appropriate in his gaze. Then Sif thought that perhaps he’d meant to show her that too. Loki was not
often purposeless in his actions.

“You look queenly,” he murmured as they ascended the last few steps together, to stand before Vár,
who held the scrolls that detailed every oath she witnessed, and before the sage who would wed
them. As King, Loki technically had the power to do so himself as he would do for any members of
the peerage who wed, or other citizens who requested specially that the King officiate but there were
certain protocols to be followed.

“That was the intention,” she hissed in reply.

“Then it was effective.”

They knelt on green velvet cushions before the two officiating, and Sif let herself be lost in the
words; they had rehearsed them several times previously. She did not mistake their weight – though
there was little magic normally held by the people of Asgard, these words were old, the runes
inscribed in the great book having been put down even before the birth of Odin Allfather. They
bound together and held, for all eternity, those two upon whom they were laid. They promised
fidelity, honor, respect, and honesty, and laid out the price for the breach of any of these. Upon Sif
they laid an extra layer of duty, for this was her coronation as well, and she was bound to the realm
in a way that went beyond the oaths she had taken as a warrior.

Those were somewhere in Vár’s scrolls, too. Sif remembered making them, remembered smearing
her blood on the scroll and watching it soak into the parchment, a physical sign of her fealty. That
was a large part of why she had agreed to do this thing, to marry when she had thought never to do
such a thing. Hateful as she found Loki’s actions, Sif knew her duty to her realm – to all the realms.
At the end of it, after the ceremonial exchange of slices of one of the golden apples raised by Idunn, after they had pricked their thumbs on a jeweled dagger (she had eyed it as she made the tiny wound in Loki’s thumb, hefted it in her hand, and decided it was useless for anything but this function) and smeared their blood on Vár’s scroll and watched it absorb, Sif felt the heavy weight of magic settle on her shoulders like a mantle.

*Nothing for it now,* she thought. *You agreed to this and you have sworn before fire and blood and blade; you cannot go any way but forward, as ever.*

Beside her, Loki rose to his feet and walked across the dais, boots making no noise on the stone floor as he took the diadem made especially for this day from where it had been on a covered pedestal beside Vár. Sif remembered the many arguments over this particular bit of uselessness, and pressed her lips together to keep from scowling. It was not strictly tradition for a husband and wife to have similar headwear for formal occasions – Frigga had her Heron crown, for instance, opposite Odin’s Eagle – but Sif had flatly refused to have two filthy great horns on her head, and so she had argued with the metalsmith in charge of the forging. In the end they had come to an agreement, but the diadem here was the worst of it. Her ceremonial helm was much more satisfactory and practical, but unfortunately she would not wear it today.

The diadem in Loki’s long fingers was a coiled dragon; wrought of the same gold metal as Loki’s ceremonial armor, its wings were furled at the sides of her head, but its eyes were glittering emeralds, glaring from the very crown of her head. Cunningly crafted onto the wings were the faint impressions of feathers, though the body was scaled. It was part of what Sif had insisted upon when the question had come up.

She glanced up to see Loki’s face but by the time he turned back to her with it he had schooled his expression into neutrality, if there had been any reaction to her choice of design at all. It was doubtful he missed many details, but his thoughts had ever been his own until he chose to share them, if he chose at all. Then why was it, she wondered, that he wanted her to see the flicker of triumph upon his face as he placed the crown upon her head? What purpose would it serve for her to know that in this moment, he felt victorious?

“Rise, Queen Sif of Asgard and the Nine Realms.”

She came back to herself and placed her hand in his to rise in one fluid motion, her heart beating quickly because she knew well what came now. In rehearsal they had never done it, could do no more than look at each other (Loki keeping his face void of any emotion, Sif wondering how many ways she could make a quick jab to his stomach look like an accident if he tried) but now was the real thing. Loki brought his hand to her cheek, thumb stroking along the bone in a curiously tender motion, before pulling her in and kissing her. She could not but react, and not only because all who could were watching, waves of applause rippling outward from the dais and through the thousands arrayed outside, for whom she was now a queen. No, there was much more to it than that, enough for Frigga to have seen and remembered in a time of need.

It was not a bad kiss, either. Loki had some skill at the art, she had to admit as they broke apart. He seemed pleased with himself, at any rate, but she had seen that expression on his face before. As though he’d some private joke that only he understood. It irritated her.

“Shall we?” he murmured, and offered her his arm. As she tucked her hand through it, he added, “My queen.”

All knelt as she passed them, the soldiers with their fists over their hearts and the ladies and nobles in their finery that pooled around them as they bowed their heads and bent their knees. Sif did not look at them; could not look at them, for some had been ones she had known in the ring when training as
a girl. All that seemed very long ago, in a time before and in the life of someone else entirely, and to think that the very warriors whose faces she’d ground into the sand during training or who had ground her own face into the sand in turn were the ones who would now be calling her *my* queen.

They stepped through the curtain veiling the antechamber and immediately the noise level dropped. Their arms slid apart, and she watched as Loki took off his helmet with what seemed to be relief. There was a faint sheen of sweat on his brow.

“You will have to wear that thing again shortly, you realize,” she told him. Loki gave her a short look.

“I will have it off as long as I can,” he replied, and tucked the helmet under his arm. “It is heavier than it appears.”

Sif, who had held this particular helmet in her hands before and knew it was light as a feather and yet stronger than the hardest stone, thought she knew his meaning. The dragon crown was the same.

A rustle of fabric and footsteps behind them made them both turn as Frigga and Tyr came through the curtains. Sif had to keep herself from dropping her eyes and making her manners, as she had always done in the presence of the queen. But she was queen now, and until Odin awakened it would remain her title. Still, Sif felt wrong not acknowledging her, and so she bowed her head, and when she looked up again Frigga was smiling gently at her.

“You both did beautifully,” she said, reaching out to embrace her son and Sif. “And I am very happy for you. But there is somewhere we all must be.”

“Yes,” Loki muttered dryly. “We must stand on a balcony and have all of Asgard gawk at us.”

“Don’t be rude,” Frigga told him mildly, but whether out of habit or his own motivation Loki remained quiet. “It is an important thing, and will only last a while. After all, some of us must change.”

It was Sif’s turn to make a sour face as they walked through the columned halls with their honor guard of Einherjar. She had four outfits for the day. *Four! And each one a new exercise in discomfort and restriction, though not all of that was relatable to the garment itself.*

Ahead, through another set of curtains, was a wide balcony draped with green and gold banners. In the cracks between them Sif could see bright sunlight, and the roar of the crowd waiting to view their king and his new queen consort was deafening. It was, Sif thought, like being on the very edge of battle. They were calm here, hidden from view, but just beyond was an army waiting to overrun them all.

Loki let go of her arm as the Einherjar and Frigga went first, putting his helmet back on and adjusting it so that it was just so. Then he took her hand, and before she could think about it the curtains were pulled aside and they stepped through.

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Usually, the chance to fall into bed was a welcome thing after a day of being paraded around, as today had been. Sif was exhausted, and if asked, would have been willing to concede that perhaps battle was less tiring than a wedding, particularly a royal one, and *especially* her own.

But there was one more costume change to endure, one more act to the great scripted drama that had been today. Her dresses from the day were arranged around Frigga’s own outer chamber, the one with the door that led to the base of Hlidskjálf where Odin lay aslumber. There was the dress she had
worn to breakfast that morning (White With Gold Detailing) then the ceremony’s gown and accoutrements, then Artfully Draped Purple Dress. The last, though, was the one she slid on now. Indigo Slip With Sheer Overlay was made of the finest silk; the sheer fabric over it embroidered in gold with designs that looked like flowering reeds. Laced at the back, the material of the dress warmed against her skin while she sat before Frigga’s vanity and let the handmaidens fuss over her. They pulled the pins out of her hair so it fell, rippled and curling, down her back, and removed the jewelry she had worn at the feast. Sif sighed in relief, and Frigga laughed.

“That was always my reaction when I could at last take my hair down,” she said, and paused in brushing the kinks out to rub Sif’s shoulders. The old queen’s hands were warm and put her at ease. The crown and her ridiculous hair might have been heavy, but Sif’s thoughts were heavier, and had been since Frigga had touched her and Loki on the shoulder at the feast with a look in her eye that none could mistake. Amid bawdy remarks and shouts of encouragement (apparently there was doubt as to whether or not Loki could in fact perform, or at least whether or not he would want to), the two of them had risen, made their farewells and final thanks, and left. Sif had taken comfort in the fact that none of the Warriors Three were adding to the din, at least not with lewd comments. With Thor gone, these three were her closest friends now.

Frigga rested a hand on her shoulder again, and Sif covered it with her own before she let Frigga resume brushing her hair and let the other handmaidens wash her hands and face and rub scented oil into her skin until it gleamed. It all seemed to be an absurd level of trouble to go through; Loki wouldn’t care, and Sif had only done this for the high feast days and had hated it then too.

“Was it as awkward for you as I imagine it will be tonight?” she asked, quietly. Frigga laughed a little, though Sif could see the lines of tension in the queen’s face and hear the strain in her voice.

“It will be much less so for you,” she said. “When I wed the Allfather, they were all in the room with us.” She caught Sif’s horrified expression and some of the tension eased. “They will remain outside the bedchamber tonight, though, I have seen to it. Do not think of us, Sif. Think of yourself, and of my son. Loki will not do ill by you, not tonight.”

“How can you be sure?”

“A mother knows. I know, or I would not have asked this from you, Sif.” She paused, setting the brush down and considering a collection of Sif’s own few jewels that had been laid by, at last selecting a serpentine hair comb and using it to pull back one side of Sif’s hair. “There. All is ready.”

Frigga’s chambers were not far from the suite she would now share with Loki – the royal suite, for such time as Loki ruled. It had been two weeks since the Allfather had fallen into the Odinsleep, however, and none could say how long it would last, not even Frigga. She said that Odin would awaken when Fate decreed and no sooner, but when Sif had visited the chamber that morning and knelt before her sleeping king to tell him she would be his good-daughter from today forward, she had come away deeply disturbed.

Now, though, she felt mostly nervous. She and her retinue passed into the outer chamber of the suite. Here would be where they would receive personal guests, or high-ranking outsider dignitaries, as a couple. It was done in warm bronze and an almost maroon color that put her in mind of her armor, both serving to offset the chilly gold of the palace. There were several people arrayed on the couches already, and Frigga took her place among them with a last gentle brush of her fingertips on Sif’s arm as Loki and his attendants came in through another door.

Their eyes met as he reached for her hand, and Sif was surprised to see the flicker of a rueful smile on his lips, an almost apologetic expression in his eyes, as if he wanted to say to her It is all right, I don’t want them here either.
“The day has been long, and my lady and I are weary,” he said. “We will retire, and speak to you again on the morrow.”

There were bows and murmurs of thanks, but Sif did not listen to them. They made their way to the bedchamber door; Loki opened it for her, and she stepped through. The click of it shutting behind her seemed too loud, in the large room.

Sif immediately saw that she would have to have time to adjust to this room; the corners were all in shadow, as was the high ceiling. While Loki made ready for the night, she paced around the room. Behind a set of heavy emerald curtains was a small seating area, and beyond that, an open-air patio, looking out over the city. Sounds of revelry drifted up from below; today and tomorrow were rest days, by royal decree. Sif did not feel very restful, all full of nervous energy as she was. Were this battle she would take it out on trolls or whatever they happened to be facing, but it was not, and all she wanted was sleep that would not come until later.

“I suppose being king has its benefits,” Loki said behind her. He had changed into loose sleeping clothes, and padded barefoot toward her with a glass in each hand. “Wine,” he said, at her questioning glance. “To perhaps make things… easier.”

She took the glass from him, returned his little salute with it, and then downed half of it in one go. Loki raised his eyebrows.

“I did not mean to make them that easy,” he said. Sif gave him a sharp look, setting her glass down.

“We are expected to share a bed as a wedded couple.”

“There was a wedding earlier today. You were there.”

“A royal wedded couple. With people listening.”

Loki’s expression became pained, and he took a rather large swig of his own wine. “Yes,” he said. “I am very aware that we have an audience, all with their ears probably pressed to the door right at this very moment.”

The image of it made her smile, just a little bit. To her surprise, so did he. In that moment, a bit of the stone she had been keeping over herself the whole day crumbled away, and Sif felt a lift in her spirits. Those hidebound, wrinkled fools (well, except for Frigga, who probably would rather not listen to her son and his new wife) wished for a production? Sif had ever hated being put on show and paraded around as a freak when she was earning her place as a warrior of the realm, but now she would have lain with her husband on the rug in the receiving chamber, and watched their scandalized faces defiantly all the while. They expected her to perhaps shy away from this? She would not do it, for it had been far more difficult unlearning her desire for a dark-haired, pale-faced princeling than it would be learning it again.

Perhaps that was what Frigga had meant, earlier. Or perhaps—

Cool fingertips brushed against the back of her hand, and Sif looked over. In the light, half of Loki’s face was in shadow and the other half thrown into sharp relief.

“You were not even in this realm,” he said. “Do you have your half-brother’s gift of sight, then?”

“Would that I did have Heimdall’s gifts,” she replied. “I would have seen this day coming before it ever reached us.”

Something, a shadow darker and yet more transparent than those on his face, passed over him.
“Would you have stopped it, then, as an enemy at the gates?”

“I suppose that will depend on how the day ends.” Sif considered the remaining wine, and then finished off her portion of it, throwing her head back, eyes closed (she could not, therefore, see how Loki swallowed at the long line of her neck as it briefly became limned in gold) and set her glass back down, making her way back through the patio. “And that, my king, depends in part upon you.”

It was well and good to have bravery in one’s cups, and while Sif was hardly drunk – she had barely been able to stomach the mead the wedding toasts had dictated and had mostly stuck to sipping chilled water the day through – she could feel herself sobering as they took their places on opposite sides of the great fur-covered bed. Now that they were back inside she could hear the faint rustling of the people in the next room, could see the rapid pulse in Loki’s neck. Her own heart hammered in her chest, loud enough that she half-hoped those waiting for the show to begin mistook it for passion and left.

“I suppose,” Loki said, and at last his nervous habits seemed to escape their carefully-hidden places. “We had best… get on with it.” She stared at him a moment, until he looked away. What, exactly, she wondered to herself, did he ever do to earn that Silvertongue nickname?

“We had best,” she agreed. Neither one of them moved. Finally, Sif rolled her eyes and kicked the embroidered slippers off her feet, pulling her skirt up to kneel on the bed. The air was cold on her bare knees as she grasped the hem and made to pull it off, scowling when she met with resistance.

“These bedamned laces,” she muttered. Sif had had quite enough of ridiculous gowns and their various methods of pulling in, shoving together… “You’ll have to untie me.”

Loki froze as he crawled onto the bed. “I beg your pardon?”

“The laces. On the back.” She twisted, reaching around to pull out the knot at the back. “You’ll have to loosen them enough for me to get this off.”

“Your garments are unnecessarily complicated,” Loki remarked, pushing her fingers out of the way and tugging enough to make the dress go slack around her shoulders.

“Speak for yourself,” she replied, crossing her arms to hold up the top of the dress – not that she had any idea why she was doing it, he was about to see her in all her unclothed glory anyway – while he worked on it. “How long did it take you to get laced and buckled and tied into your formal armor? Though truly, it cannot compare with the fact that by the time I was finally bound up for that ceremony, I felt certain that the layers of fabric alone could… stop an arrow…”

Sif trailed off; Loki had since come to kneel opposite her, their legs brushing, and stopped her words, fingertips pressed to her lips. She had rarely been close enough to see the flecks of green and grey in his eyes, but now she was once more, the blue not nearly as clear as it seemed from arm’s length, the distance he usually kept everything and everyone at. Letting one side of the shift drop, she reached up and cupped his cheek. He was cool to the touch, but not uncomfortably so. More like the cool side of the pillow. Fascinated, Sif watched as his eyes shut, but she only had a glimpse of his lashes, dark against the dark circles that had sprung up under his eyes in the two weeks since he had been given the power to rule Asgard. Because he was kissing her again, and it was not a thing put on for show, to make it seem to others that they were doing more than acting the part of glad-hearted royal newlyweds. But that did not mean it was gentle, either. Exploratory, yes, but there was an edge of actual need that tugged at her insistently.

They broke apart, and looked at each other. Loki’s eyes strayed lower; when she’d let go of it, the shift had slipped down her arm, baring one of her breasts. Sif felt self-conscious, in a way that she
hadn’t since she had taken to bathing with the others in their little group, all of them mother-naked and without a care in the world, or so she’d thought. But she took the dress in her hands and pulled it up over her head, bare again as she had been on so many summer days when they’d all made a dash for one of the spring-fed pools in the forests around Asgard.

This was not harmless play, though. This was real, and the way Loki’s lips parted when she dropped it unceremoniously onto the bench at the foot of the bed was not something done for the benefit of others; if there was meaning inherent in it, it was lost on Sif, suddenly aware of her body as she was. He reached out, touched two fingers to her collarbone, trailed them down over small, hard breasts and well-formed abs.

“You said something about getting on with it?” she asked.

Sif was hardly a stranger to the concept of sex; unlike some other realms she had visited, Asgard did not espouse the barbaric practice of putting out bloody sheets, nor did they generally police virginity for either men or women though it was none-too-quietly encouraged among noblewomen to remain unbedded until marriage. Certainly she had had other partners, and as far as she knew so had Loki, but for some reason all that previous experience seemed less than useless. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it was hardly what she would have called good from herself. Perhaps it was the fact that there were horrible, voyeuristic sages out in the other room, listening for the appropriate inappropriate sounds, or that less than two weeks ago Sif had never even contemplated the idea of marrying Loki, or that they were both nervous or exhausted or any number of things. He was attentive enough, but the way his brows drew together, almost as though he had to concentrate too much on the task, was enough to belie that Loki was not at all at ease. The knot of tension in her belly did not dissolve after she climaxed, though her limbs felt loose and pleasantly tingly, as they usually did, and Loki had that half-apologetic look on his face again.

Sif sighed and let her head fall back against the pillow, and as she did she felt her comb tumble out of her hair. It had come loose during their little interlude. Loki plucked it up from the bedding, turning it over in his fingers as he lay beside her.

“Here’s an unusual thing,” he murmured, tracing its shape with a fingertip. “Like a snake.”

Sif narrowed her eyes at him. “Give that here.” She made a grab for it but Loki held it out of her reach, the comb dancing on the ends of his fingers, and Sif made an exasperated noise. “Loki, I am tired and I just want to sleep. For just one moment could you—“

“Do you remember where you got this?”

The way he was looking at her was enough to make her pause, then drop her arm, letting it drape across his body on top of the furs. “It was from one of the feasts at Yule, the one celebrating the longest night of the year,” she replied. “Someone gifted it to me. I could never find out who.”

Loki smiled a little. It was a tiny thing, and it did not quite reach his eyes, but it was true. “I suppose now that we are wed, I can tell you that it was I who gave it to you.”

She stared at him. That had been years and years ago, before she had sworn herself as a warrior of the realm. “You did?”

“I thought it looked better on you than it did on me.”

Sif punched his arm. “Don’t jest. Why did you do it?”

At her next grab for the comb he let it drop into her palm, rolling onto his side to watch her stretch to
place it on the little table by the bed. “I wanted to.”

Her fingers rested on the warm metal. A snake, and the metal was certainly silver but took on an iridescent shine in some lights; she ought to have realized, but she’d never given it the thought. Pursing her lips, Sif scooted back into her warm spot in the furs, pulling them up to her chin. “Well, I want to go to sleep, but not if we’ve still an audience.”

Loki made a face. “I should hope we put that one to bed – ah, so to speak – but… a moment.” He held out a hand, and waved his other one at Sif when she began to ask what he was doing. He passed a hand over his palm and there was a tiny mouse, glowing green-gold and incredibly lifelike for all of that. Loki and the mouse looked at each other a moment, then he blew gently at it, and it dissolved into a stream of light that snaked across the bed and went under the door.

“Quite a trick,” Sif said. Loki, watching the crack under the door, said nothing. In a moment the stream of light was back, reforming into the mouse as she watched and skittering across the furs into Loki’s palm. It made a chittering noise, and Loki nodded solemnly (a thing that would have been comical had Sif not been watching somewhat amazed) before flicking his fingers and dispelling it.

“We are alone, Fates be thanked,” he said, and settled back into the bed looking far more comfortable. “You may rest easy knowing that you will not be spied upon by crusty old sages hoping to prove our, ah, consummation.”

“I shudder at the very thought.” Sif muttered, but closed her eyes and tried to relax. It felt strange to have someone else in the bed with her. The lovers had never stayed the night, and she preferred to sleep alone anyway. “Goodnight, Loki.”

When he replied, his voice sounded soft and very far away. “Goodnight, Sif.”

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When she woke the next morning – not at dawn but not long after it, certainly – it was with a groan and the intense desire to let her head drop and go back to sleep. Sif could feel every muscle in her body protesting the fact she was trying to move from where she’d passed the night apparently sprawled across half the bed and Loki, who was still asleep. She shifted off him and paused, lying on her stomach a moment to watch the rise and fall of his chest under the furs. He looked calm, brow smooth and lips parted slightly, and not at all like the cold, power-hungry man he had appeared to be that day on the throne.

Had they been any other couple or had theirs been any other kind of union, Sif supposed she could have woken him with a kiss or somewhich like that, but a shift of her hips and an accompanying grimace put paid to that sentimental thought. She slipped from the bed and padded naked into the bathing room. A good thing about being queen, she thought, turning the knobs on the great tub, was that she had no need to share tubs or wait for hot water.

When the water was high enough she sank into it with a hiss, the heat flushing her skin. It felt good, and she took a moment to relax, letting the warmth soak in to tired and tense muscles before getting to work. Taking a handful of the granular, scented soap, Sif scrubbed all over her body briskly, not minding the sting. When that was done and she felt cleaner in body and mind, she took a breath and slipped under the water, letting her hair drift around her face and staring up at the surface of the water until she could hold her breath no longer and rose, scrubbing the soap into her hair now and dunking again to rinse it out, tipping her head back and floating a bit in the water to make sure she got the last suds out.

When she went back into the bedroom, wrapped up in a towel, one of the royal attendants (Sif had
met them all but could not for the life of her recall this one’s name – Sigrid? Astrid? Something like that) was speaking to Loki, who was being dressed.

“We have one last function to attend,” he said, and Sigrid-or-Astrid left off speaking to him and came over to help her into a green frock that sparkled with jewels. “An official breakfast.”

The gown might have been pretty to her if Sif had not been completely fed up with the whole damn event. She had thought it would all be over and done with yesterday, so crossly, she snapped, “To celebrate the fact we fucked last night?”

Loki was facing away, but she met his reflection’s gaze defiantly. He had the grace to look embarrassed, at least, even if his reply was “Don’t be crude.”

“It’s the truth.” Sif’s fingers tightened, the knuckles turning white as she gripped the edge of the vanity while the attendant tightened the laces of the dress. She was truly weary of being tied into things, forcing herself to be quiet when she was screaming inside. It was how she had imagined her life had she tried to be what her parents had wanted her to be – a lady of the court, rather than a warrior. If that became her fate now…

“Even so,” Loki said, as their attendants left. “It is our duty, as king and queen of Asgard, to make such gestures for certain of our citizens. Believe me, Sif,” and as the attendants were gone, she could see that he looked uncomfortable himself, “I would rather not have to do this. There are more pleasant ways to spend breakfast the morning after one’s wedding. I had thought…”

She waited for him to finish, but instead watched in silence as all his gates slammed shut again, the locks slid smoothly into place from years of use. Apparently there were limits, Sif thought.

“Nothing for it,” she said. He nodded, and came over to her, offering her his arm as he had yesterday. She took it, and kept her chin up defiantly as they left the royal chambers.
Oh my goodness, I'm so glad that so many of you liked the first chapter! I hope you all continue to like this. The next couple chapters are fairly short so I apologize in advance.

**electrostatics**; the branch of physics that deals with the phenomena of stationary or slow-moving (without acceleration) electric charges.

The door slammed open when her palm struck it and Sif stormed through, tearing off bits and pieces of her formal ensemble as she went – gold bracers first, clattering on the floor, then the jeweled clips that held her hair back from her face. It did not tumble down but streamed back behind her in her wake, curled and tangled from where it had been bound. She did not thrive on chaos as he did, but war was not an orderly thing.

As she passed through the bedchamber and out toward the balcony still shedding accessories, Loki stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him with barely a sound and looking after Sif. Though his study was littered with piles of books he was meticulous in many other things, but the thought of picking up the pieces left behind in the wake of his wife’s anger did not even cross his mind; Sif cleaned her own messes and he did not want to make her angrier than she already was. Their first month of marriage had not been a smooth one by any means, but there were certain things he knew about Sif that made him sure of his decision.

“Damn them all!” he heard her snap, out on the patio, and pressed his lips together as he passed through the heavy curtain. This was not the first function of state that she had abruptly excused herself from and he was fairly certain that it would not be the last, but he wished she wouldn’t, for it made things awkward later. No matter how much Loki understood that this life she found herself in would not be an easy adjustment, he also knew that for all his placating words to the particular set of nobles and dignitaries today, there would be a group sooner or later who would not let it slip so easily. It could cause problems for them, and by the sound of it, there were problems enough – not only internally, as not all members of the peerage were at all pleased with the fact he was sitting on the throne in Odin’s stead, but also from places far from Asgard. The realms below were full of opportunists and enemies who only nominally paid the Realm Eternal their respect, though they had legitimately feared Odin. His dark son was another matter, though, and Loki was not a fool to miss their maneuverings. They knew Asgard was vulnerable.

But that was not his concern right now.

“Sif?” he called. He could see her, standing in the sun with the gems on her gown sparkling and her hair ruffled in the light breeze coming off the water. She looked back over her shoulder, then back out over the city.

“Come to chastise me again?” she snapped. “To tell me my behavior was wrong, as though I were yet a child?”

Loki held in a sigh; it would only enrage her more and the last thing he wanted right now was for Sif to be angry the rest of the day. “No. You are not a child, you are my wife, and—–“
“Then why were you making excuses to that group of idiots?” Sif made a very violent gesture in the air, no doubt an expression of what she intended to do to the particular one who had made the remark that someone had finally taken the uncouth Sif Bergsdottír into hand. Loki had not missed the slight against himself, either—Did you woo her with your charms, my king, or charms of another sort?—but in the wake of Sif barely keeping herself composed long enough to make her manners and leave table he had chosen to let it slide (but not forget it, of course).

“Because I am king,” he said, standing beside her at the edge of the patio. Her hands were fists against the gold stone of the palace, the knuckles white and every scar she had earned from her years of training and battle standing out starkly. “And you are queen.” He looked out, across the gleaming spires of the city toward the Bifrost Observatory. “Things are no longer as simple as they were before that.”

If she only knew how true that was—but he had not told her the truth of his birth yet, could not bring himself to do it. When the union had been proposed no small part of Loki had reveled in it, for he had watched Sif with longing in his heart from the day he had realized it (she had been battling another of their group in practice and Loki had seen her face, dark brows knit together in focus and hair flying behind her like a proud banner, the sand-dust turning her leggings ashy and just like that he had been caught) until the day his mother had stood before him in Gladsheim and made her case for it.

The people need to know that their leadership is stable, the woman who had raised him had said. They need to know their king cares for their hearts as well. The whole realm needs this of you, Loki. And he had agreed to it. It would give the realm something to rejoice over, would mark that he was serious—a new rule, a new queen, a new beginning, the layers of symbolism were more than he cared to think about or go into right now.

“I am trapped,” Sif said quietly, “In all these gowns and feasts and the endless hours of speaking to nobles who sneered at me when I declared myself a warrior. I tire of the way they smile and bow and bend the knee, when I can see their duplicity in their eyes. They know I do not belong here. It is just as it was when I first took up training—I am a sport among the rest.”

“Neither of us belong,” Loki replied, and was surprised at the sincerity of his own words, not intending to do more than placate her so the morning’s business could continue. But it was truth; he no more belonged in Asgard, let alone as its king, than Sif belonged in the position she had found herself in. Sif belonged at the head of a line of warriors, her glaive raised high, and he…

Where did he belong? Not in Asgard, and not in Jotunheim. He belonged nowhere.

He realized Sif was looking at him, a strange expression on her face, and continued smoothly before she could begin to ask awkward questions he didn’t want to answer for her yet. “I was never meant to sit on the throne,” he said. “It was always Thor who was groomed to be the heir.”

Sif snorted, looking away again, and a coiled part of Loki relaxed. “But it was what you wanted,” she said, and there was a keen edge to her voice. “You always trailed after Thor, his black-and-green shadow, and said you were content with your lot, but some of us are not so easily fooled as the Warriors Three.”

“He was my brother, Is my brother.” He looked down, slotted a thumbnail in between two of the close-laid blocks of the palace, picking out flecks of dirt that had likely been there longer than Loki had even been alive. How was he to tell Sif that he had gone on half of Thor’s adventures in the hopes that some deed of his would be recognized, found worthy enough to tell in the same tones of awe and respect that Thor’s were told in, rather than the mockery that people spoke of his own deeds with? “I went with him in all things, whether or not I thought they were folly.”
“Like Jotunheim.”

For a moment Loki’s throat constricted, for a moment panic flooded him that she had guessed, that she had seen his skin turn blue instead of frozen black… then he caught up to his mind and he realized she simply meant their ill-fated journey there in the first place.

“Yes,” he replied. Would that the guard had told Odin in time for him to stop them from departing at all; he could have continued on… what? Living in lies? How would that have been any different than what people thought of him anyway? “Like Jotunheim.”

Of course, he mused as she looked down at her hands on the stone railing, had none of that happened – had Frigga not come to him right as he had been about to leave and speak to his biological father, to propose that he marry and show the realm he was not treating this as one of his transient japes – he would never have been wed, and they would not be having this conversation, and he would not wake up beside her every morning. There was yet a gulf between them, a chasm which he did not know how to cross – he had always been able to play people as though they were but pieces on a board, but understanding and relating to them was another matter entirely – but perhaps in time, they might…

“Would you do it now, Loki?”

“Do what?”

“Allow Thor to return.”

On the other hand, perhaps not.

Loki did not clench his hands, much as he wanted to; did not betray the hot jealousy that lodged in his heart. Of Thor, of the fact that he so effortlessly had people follow him, where Loki had to reach for it all only to fear losing it through his fingers. Even Sif… even though they were bound by word and by that strange old magic he had never been able to crack, there was always a chance, for no magic was unbreakable. Loki wondered if he would lose her too, if Thor returned. He stood to lose too much if Thor returned.

“The Allfather banished him for a reason,” Loki said, carefully choosing his words. He took a perverse pleasure in watching as Sif realized this was what he was doing, and seeing her expression flicker into annoyance again at having to endure more games. “Thor may return if he understands that reason. But until then I cannot interfere.”

“Cannot?” Sif asked, and that edge was rising in her voice. “Or will not?”

“Does it matter?” He turned, making to leave.

“It matters to me,” Sif said to his back. “It ought to matter to you.” She followed him, catching up and laying a hand on his arm. “You have the power to change things now,” she said, and it annoyed him that she would be so adamant about Thor – that she would put aside her irritation with him for the purpose of getting his dear brother back.

“He is your brother,” she said at last. “And my dear friend, and we have all gone together into danger for so long, you cannot have forgotten that. Will you at least consider it?”

Loki looked at her a long time, and Sif met his eyes without hesitation, without fear. He should have known better than to think she would drop this subject; when Sif wanted something, she went after it. The incessant machinations of the court had not yet ground her down, though they wore on her.
She was right; she did not belong here. At least not in the way they were going about it.

“I promise I will think on the matter,” he said at last, and she smiled at him. That alone made it worth the trouble, and yet… “Do not look so pleased, I cannot tell you I will decide to bring him back.”

“A month ago you would not even do this.” Her expression soured as they made their way back to the door. “Will we be returning to that room of fools?”

“No, I have arranged to meet with them separately later on. That way they cannot overwhelm me with their stupidity.”

“That may be the wisest thing I have heard come out of your mouth yet.”

“Nobody ever said I was wise, Sif.”

“Wiser than they are. I could not stomach dealing with them so much.”

“Then it’s good that I’m the one who does.”

She smiled then, but the lines of tension were back in her face when they parted – him going off to continue these tedious maneuvers with people who held as much disdain for him as he held for all of them, and her going off back to her trap, the circle she was expected to sit with and entertain. His mother was helping her, it was true, but something in him clenched to see his wife with that expression on her face. It was as though she was marching off to a battle she knew she could not win, and for no prize worth the casualties she would sustain. Sif had ever been proud, and the fact that she could not do something herself must have been galling her. It was, he reflected as he made his way back to his audience chamber just off of Gladsheim, a very familiar feeling.

* *

“My king, will you reconsider—“

Loki’s eyes snapped back over to the noble before him, kneeling on the polished stone floor. Sif had had the right of it in voicing her frustrations; he knew these people had no love for him, had never had any love for him, and yet here they were pretending that they did. They had no idea that he still held plans that would be considered the height of treason, that he could kill each one of them now with no more than a thought and a wave of his hand.

“I will not,” he said, and though his voice was calm it carried an air of finality. “The lands rightfully belong to Edvar Ansgarson. I could not reduce his in good conscience—” a joke coming from him, if ever there was one “—and the holdings you already have are the most productive in the realm.”

“And they could be more productive, if only—“

Loki held up a hand. “Perhaps you may speak to Ansgarson again, Lord Bergrenson,” he said. “Mayhap your charm will succeed with him better than it has with me.”

While Bergrenson gaped at him, angry at the slight but unable to retaliate against his king, Loki kept in a smile. Sometimes, he thought, it was good to be king.
Thank you all for reading and continuing to comment! I’ve gotten some of the nicest and most well-thought-out comments on this and it’s very flattering. Please, keep it up, I love it!

Meanwhile, on Earth...

*covalent bond:* a form of chemical bonding characterized by the sharing of pairs of electrons between atoms.

“Look, all I’m saying is that I have no idea what I’d do for a thesis. I mean, you know what that was like, yeah? *Totally* freaky.”

Erik gave her a very mild look and sipped his coffee. “I think you’d do just fine in grad school – I’ll certainly write you a letter for anything and anywhere you need, and so will Jane. Isn’t that right, Jane?” When they got no answer, Darcy got up, pouring a fresh cup of coffee and taking it over to her boss.

“Hey, Wonder Woman,” she said, nudging Jane’s shoulder. “Coffee.”

Jane started before she took the cup absently, not looking away from her computer screen. Darcy hovered next to her a moment longer, eyebrows rising at a rate probably steady enough to be used as some kind of mathematical constant.

“You’re welcome?”

“Yes,” Jane replied dreamily. “I mean thanks.”

“C’mon, Jane,” Darcy said. “All you’ve done since Muscles got out of the SHIELD hoosegow is work. I know you want to find a way to get him home and prove your theories and all, but working yourself down to the bone isn’t gonna help anyone. Besides, your boyfriend gets this awful neglected look like a puppy that’s been bad. It’s like, the saddest thing I’ve ever seen, and that’s counting those ASPCA commercials that always use Sarah McLachlan songs to guilt-trip you into giving them money.”

“Thor isn’t my boyfriend,” Jane protested, but twin spots of color had risen on Jane’s cheeks, and she pushed back from the loaner laptop she’d bullied Culver University into sending out.

“Where is he today?”

“Doing some work for the Simonsons,” Jane replied instantly. “They needed a hand putting up a new barn and he offered.”

“It’s good that he’s keeping busy,” Erik said. “I can’t imagine what a change it’s been, going from what he says he was, to, well…”

“At this rate there won’t be anything else left to build in this no-horse town. He’ll have *built* it all.”
“At least it keeps him away from SHIELD,” Jane muttered. They still hadn’t returned her things and didn’t seem inclined to, and it had been over a month. Worse, they wanted to cart Thor off to some top-secret facility (Darcy was sure it would be either Area 51 or Stargate Command) where they’d probably dissect him and grow pieces of him in culture dishes to see how he worked. The first time they’d told her – a mistake in and of itself, because there were very few people in the world who could tell Jane to do anything she didn’t want to do – she had, predictably, dug in her heels and threatened them with all kinds of legal action if they tried. She’d proceeded from there into a diatribe about the fate of her equipment, and the three of them had simply sat by and watched with pride (Thor), amusement (Darcy), and horror (Erik) as Jane had said things that probably would have made any one of the SHIELD agents watch them right now blush like schoolgirls.

The only things that made Jane herself blush were things concerning Thor, a fact that had only become increasingly apparent after they’d all gotten apartments across the street from the lab. Ostensibly Thor was sleeping on Jane’s couch, but Darcy had been in Jane’s apartment, and it sure didn’t look like it. When she’d shared this juicy tidbit with Erik he’d gotten a pained look on his face and dropped an Alka-seltzer into his water, a fact that amused her greatly. Darcy was happy for Jane, though; up until Thor had run into them face-first in the desert, it had been difficult to remember Jane was even human sometimes.

“Someone needs to be able to pull you away from your work without having to take the tools out of your hands,” Darcy said briskly, and sprawled back in her chair. “He might still be talking like he’s an extra in some period action flick, but he’s pretty good at getting you to stop working.” She smirked as Jane tried to hide her blush and failed. Jane had gotten better since Darcy had started on with her about learning when to stop, but only just.

Thor had changed himself, though; he’d seemed more subdued, thoughtful, since Erik had busted him out. Sometimes Darcy caught him looking at the sky, or in the direction of that crater west of town. She wondered if he was thinking about home, because he always looked a little sad, which made Darcy want to drag him inside and force-feed him doses of *Adventure Time* until he laughed again. Seeing Thor down seemed to upset the natural balance of things, though she had to admit she was glad to see he wasn’t completely cocky anymore.

She could understand why he was so sad though. She was pretty sure Earth was Tatooine to his Coruscant.

“He’ll be back for dinner,” Jane was saying as she leaned on the counter to finish her coffee. “I was thinking we could all go for pizza tonight.”

“He needs to be introduced to the best vegetable in the universe,” Darcy said, pulling another book on Norse culture and tradition toward her. “He’s gonna be here a while, it sounds like.”

“Pizza is *not* a vegetable.”

“It totally is. And even if it isn’t it has all the food groups on it.”

“It’s still not a vegetable, Darcy.”

Around four, Thor came barging back into the lab. He was head-to-toe red desert dust, but Jane didn’t seem to mind that as he swept her into a hug and one of those cheesy-but-effective kisses on the hand. She did send him off to shower and change clothes before she’d let him near her equipment, though, but it was said with a laugh and a warm look in her brown eyes.

Darcy took this as her cue to order pizzas and have the place put a rush order on them; once Jane sucked her Asgardian boy-toy into her vortex of work enthusiasm it took more work than it was
worth to peel them away.

Her equipment might still be in the clutches of SHIELD, but Jane wasn’t going to let that stop her from getting things done. In one corner of the lab, carefully tucked in behind bookshelves and couches that obscured the view of any lurking SHIELD agent thugs, several key pieces of equipment were being rebuilt. It was slow going – some of it Jane had to scrounge up from electronic-waste centers, some she had to hound Culver to give her the funds for, but she was doing what she could with what she had.

Jane peered at Erik as they ate dinner beside the second of the two big projects. “Did you get to the library and the copy center today?” she asked.

“I did. The pictures are over there.” He gestured with his forkful of salad – heartburn sadly preventing him from the joys of a fresh pizza pie – at a small end table with a thick manila folder on it. “Jane, you don’t—”

“Yes, I do,” she cut in. “It fits in with what we’ve heard and read. It fits the myths, and it fits my theory. I think these… branches of Yggdrasil,” and she gestured at the wall covered in printouts and notes and strings linking things together, “Are stable wormhole connections between points in space. Completely stable and established – anchored, even – Einstein-Rosen bridges. Can you imagine it?”

“I can imagine the kind of reception you’ll get in the scientific community.”

“I think we’ve moved past that at this point,” Jane said. “I think we were past it a long time ago. I believe Thor. I believe there’s a way to Asgard.”

They all exchanged looks at that, but again, all were different. Jane was determined, her brows drawn together in that stubborn look of hers; Erik’s shoulders were slumped. Darcy watched Thor glance at Jane a moment, mingled pride and longing in his eyes, and bit in to her own slice to keep from pressing her lips together.

She couldn’t keep up with them when they went on one of their science-and-magic benders (though the magic part of it was way easier for her to understand, she’d grown up on Harry Potter after all) but she didn’t think that it was as impossible as Erik thought. They just needed the right toys to get to the playground.

But after a few minutes more she couldn’t stand the awkward silence and so she asked Thor how he liked pizza. Much to Darcy’s delight, Thor declared pizza one of the many wonders of Midgard, and they all laughed. The tension wasn’t gone though, not completely. It was just set aside for a little bit, but that temporary relief was just fine with her.

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Later, after Darcy had gone back to her trashy reality TV and Erik to his own work, Jane went up to the roof of the dealership to find Thor laying on his back on one of the deck chairs. He was staring up at the sky, as he often was. The lights of the town obscured the view somewhat, but the stars were still brilliant enough to shine through the minimal light pollution from the main street. Jane hesitated by the roof access door a moment, wondering if he was trying to find an arrangement of stars that looked familiar, so he at least knew where his home might be.

The thought made her sad, so she cleared her throat and stepped into the wash of light from the neon signs. “Thor?” Jane called softly. In the desert, all things sounded louder. “I brought coffee, if you wanted some.”

He looked over at her and sat up, broad shoulders blocking out part of the town’s neon glow. “My thanks, Jane Foster,” he said quietly as he took the steaming mug from her hands, and tucked a thick
blanket around her shoulders when she sat. A frigid wind flapped at the ends, blew her hair into her mouth; it was supposed to snow later in the week, but Jane figured that they’d just get freezing rain. They’d still have to bring everything inside, though. Later.

“The stars are close here,” Thor said, after they’d sat in calm silence for a time. “I understand again why you like this place so. You are close to what you love.”

The way he said that made her look over. They were shoulder to shoulder – Jane liked it, not to mention Thor made a decent windbreak – so she had to look up at his profile, dark here but backlit by the town and the stars. “What’s it like?” she asked, finally. “What are the stars like in Asgard?”

She had that one chart from when he’d first arrived here, but hadn’t had occasion to get any others, and she’d spent so much time asking other questions of him she hadn’t asked any about Asgard itself. Jane and the others had carefully avoided bringing it up, too. They all figured the pain of homesickness was too close.

Thor was silent a moment, and Jane worried she’d stepped over a line, jumped the gun – like with other relationships of hers – but then he grinned and when he spoke, his voice was full of gentleness and longing. “We are closer to Yggdrasil’s branches – indeed we are where its trunk splits into many ways,” he said. “So the sky is brilliant with its colors. But the stars are brilliant too, a whole river of them flowing across the sky——”

“A galactic arm, maybe,” Jane murmured to herself.

“—and the rest twinkle through the veil like gems on a lady’s gown. And Asgard itself glows beneath it all.” Thor looked at her then, his blue eyes twinkling. “You would like it – love it, I know. And I could show you the golden halls, the libraries, the places I knew well as a boy… the beauty of Asgard. Of my home.”

“It sounds lovely,” Jane said, and meant it. But not for the first time she wondered what he thought of Earth, when he had that paradise to compare it to?

“Jane?”

She lifted her gaze from the tiny bubbles on the surface of her coffee and met his. “Yeah?”

“You seem sad.”

“Oh, no, I’m all right,” she replied quickly. “And I promise, I’ll get you home to Asgard. It’s just…”

“What?”

“I’ll just miss you, when you go home.”

“Why, you shall accompany me home, of course!” Thor said enthusiastically. “I would show you my home, Jane, and I would share it with you. If that was what you desired.” There were implications there, she was sure of it, but Jane’s mind had already moved on and would not revisit them until late at night when she lay awake with Thor snoring peacefully beside her. But Thor’s face had fallen again, and he looked back up at the stars. “But the way home is closed to me, and even were I to be able to travel the Bifrost, the peace with Jotunheim is conditional upon my banishment.”

“It seems harsh, doesn’t it?” Jane asked. “I mean, couldn’t you go home and make a formal apology to the leader of the frost giants, and just… stay away from Jotunheim? Why is it this way?”

“Before he died, my father wished me to learn a lesson. I am still learning.” There was pain as he mentioned his father, and as he lay back on his deck chair she did too, rolling into the blanket. “I
went before Laufey with the intent to fight, to kill when my people had already shed so much Jotunn blood,” he continued softly. “I did kill. My brother’s skill with words is great, so I am lucky that they did not demand the blood price for what I did. It is meet that I be stripped of my titles and never threaten the safety of Jotunheim again. With my father’s death, it will be all my brother can do to keep the realm together. Loki was never meant to take the throne, but it is my mistakes that have put him there. I have wronged him as much as I have wronged Laufey and Jotunheim and my own realm.”

Jane reached over and took his hand, but her thoughts were her own, confused, conflicted. They had brought up the matter of Loki’s reputation in the myths, but Thor had dismissed it on the whole. His brother was solitary, he’d insisted, and prone to tricks and the occasional bout of equivocation, and certainly he was an expert at spinning tales that sometimes were meant to hurt. But his brother would not lie to him, surely – they were brothers, they had grown up together, that kind of bond meant something.

“Maybe when things cool down, you can go home,” she said quietly at last, giving Thor’s hand a squeeze and feeling her mouth go dry when the muscles in his arm that lay alongside hers flexed under the flannel coat he wore.

“Things usually move more slowly when the people of a realm do not live such short lives as the people of Midgard,” Thor murmured. “Slights, insults… they are not so easily forgiven or forgot.”

“Then I’ll take you there myself and change things,” she replied briskly, and Thor laughed.

“You and Loki would be great companions, I think,” he said. “You are both clever in the ways of science and magic, and as determined as anyone. Perhaps you are both too clever and determined by half for the good of either one of you, but it is not something I would want changed.” He turned onto his side and put his arm over her, and Jane curled against him comfortably, feeling his voice rumble against her cheek as he said “I would be curious indeed to know how he fares as king.”
Electrosynthesis

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for this chapter. I... yeah, that's all I can say.

*electrosynthesis*; in organic chemistry, the synthesis of chemical compounds in an electrochemical cell.

It was a routine by now. Habit would have Sif awaken at dawn, when the first rays of golden light slanted over the edge of the world and between the cracks of the heavy curtain separating inside and out; but apathy would keep her abed until the chamberlain came to wake them for their morning ablutions and she felt Loki’s fingertips slide across her shoulder. It was likely he knew she was not asleep, though she would often slide away from him and wrap herself in the furs, her back to him. But then she could not stand her own lack of movement and rose, letting her handmaiden (Astrid, as it turned out) win the battle, as it always was.

Routine: bathe, and then be helped into another dress from her wardrobe. The royal couturiers had been steadily producing gowns fit to what their vision of a *former* warrior would want to wear. Add to these whatever bits of useless armor it was thought would complete her ensemble (a shoulder-guard that would not stop a dull knife; a breastplate that would only serve to drag her down, those damned gold bracers), sweep her hair up into some fashion she was assured was stylish, all while missing the familiarity of her tunic, the way her boots knew her feet and allowed her to move through the steps of the only dance she’d ever cared to learn. Her training leathers and her own armor were in her wardrobe, sure, the leathers folded away and the armor displayed on a stand as though she was some grandfather too old or too broken to do battle and die honorably.

Truthfully, Sif thought, as she participated in the next stage of the ritual – breakfast, with Loki on the patio this morning rather than in one of the small halls with a group of people who laughed behind their hands at her – she thought that might be her fate. To die here, behind the invisible bars of her prison, without valor or honor. It would be a kinder one than enduring the rest of her day.

She had not had much use for the womanly arts once she’d picked up a blade and begun her training in earnest. She could do some sewing, it was true, but enough to whipstitch the shoulder of a leather jerkin, or do up the laces on one of the layers of padding that went under armor. But the yarn she spun was lumpy and useless, and the stitches made in her hoop big and messy, and while her title might protect her from any direct insult, Sif knew that the highborn ladies who had the honor of sitting in the queen’s circle talked. People always talked.

This was what she had hoped to escape, when she had taken up the sword. This awful constraint, this expectation to do things that she had no skill or desire for. But it was her duty as queen, and Sif could not, *would* not shirk her duty to Asgard, as much as it made her want to beat her fists against the walls and scream. She had thought that perhaps things would improve after their wedding, but Loki did not give her relief, and thinking on the kind of queen Frigga had been, Sif could not let herself do less than the woman who had been half her own mother all her life. Queens did not tussle in the dirt with the warriors.

“Sif?”
She looked up. Loki was gazing at her, an odd look in his eyes. She could see it every now and then, something she could not describe. “Yes?”

“You have not eaten. Are you unwell?”

Yes, Sif thought. Yes, my so-dear husband, I am sick in heart and mind. They say that the hands of the king heal; do you think yourself capable of healing me?

“It is not to my liking,” she said acidly, though she did like the sunfruit, and the melons were juicy and inviting.

Loki made to gesture to one of the attendants. “I can have something else sent—“

“No. I have lost my appetite.” Sif rose, taking her skirts in hand and feeling a perverse pleasure in the quickly-veiled hurt on Loki’s face. On their wedding night she had thought to rekindle the affections she thought she had rid herself of – the thought of them being acted upon seeming to be a dreamer’s impossibility then – but now she wondered how Frigga had kept from going mad, and how she was going to keep from going mad herself. “Good day, husband.”

She swept from the room, not looking back though she felt his eyes on her. Strange how the sensation was such a hot prickle when the man was always so cool, or at least endeavored to seem so; he always kept himself at arm’s length before, and despite their vows, seemed intent on keeping it that way.

Thankfully part of her day was to be spent with Frigga. The old queen was a comfort to her, and as their guards looked on watchfully Sif took in the sun on her skin, warming her.

“My son seems more content these days,” she said. “He has always wanted to prove himself a leader as his brother was—as he is, I will not speak of Thor as though he has gone to be with Hel. He has done admirably.”

“It is as you say, my lady.”

Frigga looked over at her good-daughter, pursing her lips. “And what of you? Do not give me platitudes, Lady Sif – I may rarely leave my husband’s bedside, but I am not blind to the world outside of it. Are you unhappy – with my son, perhaps?”

“No, Loki has done nothing.” It was true enough, she thought bitterly.

“No ignoring you, paying no mind to your needs…?”

The tones she couched that question in made Sif look up sharply. “No, my lady, that is not the problem,” she said vehemently. In truth, she could not have faulted Loki whenever he turned to her to do this particular bit of royal duty. He was trying to please her, she could tell, and sometimes she let herself give in and then it was almost all right. And yet… “If there is anyone I am dissatisfied with, my lady, it is myself. I have tried to do what I have thought the realm requires of me, and yet it does not feel right. It is as though I am trying to keep a ship from sinking with only a goblet to bail the water. I do not think…”

They had come to the edge of the garden, a low stone wall all between them and the plunge. Far below she could see the practice yards with their golden-tan sand, men in leathers with swords honing their skills. Sif’s hands clenched into fists as she watched.

That is where I belong, she thought. Not here in the palace, a cold queen of a land caught in a winter of its own making.
“Sif?”

Frigga rested her hand on Sif’s arm, and she looked over, making herself smile for the queen. “I am sorry, my lady. I was lost in thought.”

“That’s all right.” Frigga gave her a sad smile. “It will get better, my dear good-daughter.”

She smiled again, but it did not reach her eyes.

*

Frigga sat beside her husband, watching him slumber in the golden stasis field of the great ship-bed. You sail through the world of dreams, dear husband, she thought. It is the waking world that needs you.

“Your realm is in disarray, oh my love,” she murmured, stroking his hand. “Your good-daughter Sif has lost her way and I fear that unless something is done she will lose herself entirely. I do not want to see our son married to a ghost. Our son…”

Frigga closed her eyes, fingers fitting through Odin’s gnarled, scarred ones. “My love, your son Loki sits on the throne these two months. He loses himself in thought as much as Sif does, and his eyes are shadowed as he looks at the Bifrost. I know he would do well if he but found his feet, if he did not think he had so much to prove.” She bit her lip. “That was our fault, yours and mine. For not being honest with him, and for reinforcing in our little ways how we knew Thor would ever be the one to sit on the throne and not Loki. For allowing him to think that we loved Thor more dearly, for allowing things to continue as they did.”

She leaned her head down, arm resting on the pillows as she kissed Odin’s bristly cheek. She tended him carefully, but for all that she had been the force behind the throne for many mortal lifetimes, could not always do some things as well as he could. “Our son is king of a realm that looks upon him disfavor, and his queen fades. Help me, love,” she whispered. “Help me show them what they need to see.”

*

Loki set aside the missive from their emissary among the Vanir and squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. When he had thought on the task of being king, he had not anticipated it to be full of quite so much tedium; certainly Odin had never seemed to be burdened by it, and he had ruled before Loki had even been born. Granted, Loki had spent a lot of time off with Thor and their companions… but not so much that he had been blind to how the realm was run, and certainly whenever Odin had bid the brothers attend him in kingly business, Loki had been the dutiful son, listening when Thor would simply talk, learning when Thor deemed it unnecessary to his vision of kingship.

He waved a hand over the missive and the pile of similar ones waiting to be read or waiting for action to be taken, and with a flash of green light they vanished. He could not be too careful; the realm was not as secure as it had once been, and it seemed with news of Asgard’s king in the Odinsleep, the heir banished, and the second son on the throne, those who would not have dared think about harrying them were beginning to get ideas. Loki would not let that happen, he resolved as he made his way toward the royal chambers. He was not Thor, who would have mustered the legions by now. He would resolve this, in his own way, and to far greater effectiveness.

But there were problems at home, too, and Loki supposed that until those were sorted than any offensive on the part of Asgard would be less than effective. Before he could get past the insipid little
squabbles the nobility laid before him, thinly-veiled tests of his ability to rule, there were other things needing attention. Until then he would be a changeling king with a depressed queen, ruling over a realm far past its days of glory.

If his mother (it felt wrong referring to Frigga as anything but mother) had sought to forestall his plans by putting him on the throne and then marrying him to Sif, she had succeeded amply. Kingship was not all sitting in Gladsheim handing down judgments; there were a thousand things to do in a day, a hundred thousand hands to clasp and remembrances to make and all the other minutiae of the job. He could not leave and speak to Laufey and carry on with his own plans without being missed by someone – some courtier, some emissary, or Sif.

Loki clenched his hands as he walked and then made himself relax, muscle by muscle, an old exercise from when he was learning the finer points of self-control. Sif was another problem. His mother had been canny once more in making her plea for marriage and then presenting him with the woman for whom he had held an attraction long before he even knew the name for it. Loki had always found a sort of strange kinship with Sif, for both were outsiders in some way; she with her weapons and her wolf's grin, and he with his magic and his mind for learning rather than smashing through everything in sight. She had been a companion, and then she had been something more than that, and he had had to be extra careful lest he let slip that there was a chink in the emotional armor of Loki Odinson.

Well, there were plenty of chinks now, and it did nothing for the turmoil that still kept him awake long after Sif had finally dropped into her own uneasy sleep that she was one of them. It was endlessly frustrating, for the rage that bubbled up in his throat every time he thought of how he had been lied to subsided when he looked upon her, because the situation was now reversed.

*She should not be here, he thought bitterly.* *She should be under the sun, warm where I am cold, beloved where I am not. She should not have to think she must be the kind of queen my mother is. Was.*

Of course, if he bid her return to what she was best at, she would dig in her heels. Certainly nobody bid Sif do anything; she was a rarity among the women of Asgard, in that she made her own decisions, perhaps even spun the skein of her own life, though none could say for certain. The Norns kept their own counsel and did not concern themselves overmuch with the affairs of the Nine Realms, except when they had reason to. But she had been put in a situation she had never wanted, and he was responsible for it. He was not so heartless as to feel no pain for her.

“Loki?”

He paused; beside one of the pillars of the promenade he walked through now stood his mother. She had fixed herself in court finery, had her hair styled in the high curls he remembered from so many affairs of state. Loki had been made to look up at that strawberry-blonde coif many times as a child, as she scrubbed away some real or imagined bit of dirt from his face.

“Mother,” he said, and bowed over her hand when she held it out. There was still ice in the waters there, yes – she was complicit in the lifelong scheme that had kept his own identity from him, but it was difficult to be angry with Frigga, even for all the meddling she’d done with his plots. Perhaps she’d seen them; it was said, after all, she had the ability to foretell the future. Perhaps she could scry into the heart of her adopted son as well, and see that he hated himself as much as he hated that he had been lied to.

“You are always so busy these days,” she said, tucking her hands around his arm when Loki offered it. “I hardly see you. You look weary, son.”
Loki, who heard Laufey echoing in his mind (Allfather, you look weary), took a moment before he could respond. “I am king; it requires a great deal more work than I thought.”

“The Allfather thought the same, when he took the throne.” The rustle of her skirts was very loud, the stiff fabric slapping against his calves with every stride. “He was as you are – he could not let others handle what he thought was his duty alone.”

“There are many things in the realms that require the attention of the king of Asgard,” Loki replied. “I would be remiss if I did not give them their due attention.”

“But not at the expense of things that are just as important.”

“What can be more important than reinforcing to the Nine Realms that Asgard is yet first among them? Especially to those who would stand against us, rather than with us?”

“One cannot build a palace upon sand,” Frigga said. “But the roots of this palace run deep and are set upon strong ground. You must make safe your foundation, my son, before you can construct anything upon it.”

“Asgard does not favor me as they favored Thor,” Loki said, and could not keep the ice out of his voice. Ever it came down to a contest between himself and the brash heir. “They did not want, nor do they want now, the trickster upon the throne.”

“Odin is not favored by all. But it is not just that of which I speak.”

“Sif.”

“She is brave, and she loves Asgard well,” Frigga said, nodding in agreement. “But she thinks to serve her realm and her king in a way she was never meant to. Even when I had her in my retinue of young ladies, when she was little more than a child, I knew her hands were better suited to needlework of a different sort than with thread.” His mother looked up at him. “She is queen, and valiantly tries to be what I was, but I would as soon have her be the queen she ought to be, rather than the queen she thinks she must be. You must see the distinction.”

Loki thought about how he had seen the two of them in the garden the other day. Sif had seemed diminished somehow, and it was wrong, because in his mind she had always seemed so far above him as to be unattainable entirely. One more thing put up out of the reach of the second prince, the false son.

“Do you wish her to be happy?”

“I wish nothing else for her but that,” he murmured. “As her husband.”

“As a lover?”

“We are hardly that.”

“Perhaps that is where you will think to start.” Frigga stopped and so did Loki, at the far end of the promenade. A set of stairs led up to Hlidskjálf, where she kept her vigil over her husband; another corridor curved, continuing across a short bridge to where the residency areas of the palace were. “You are well-matched, I have seen it, Loki. I would not have bid you wed her if I thought it would be ill for either one of you, for she is like the daughter I never had, and nothing can grow if there is not already a seed there. And you… my dear son.” She smiled sadly and put her hand on his cheek. “A marriage is not simply about the oaths or the promises or the bedchamber; it is about filling the spaces where the other is not. Sif is strong where you are wanting, and you are skilled in things she
finds difficult. Work in tandem, and the realm will be strong. *That is what Asgard needs from its king… and its queen.*”

Loki kept from biting his lip in thought right there, but his mind was churning over. He had never considered marriage much, but Frigga’s words had a ring of truth to them. At least, it had always seemed to be as she said between herself and the Allfather. “I will remember your words and think on them,” he said, and kissed her hand again. “Be well, Mother.”

“And you, my son. Never forget that I love you.”

He made to go, but paused. “Do you suppose Father would be proud of me?” he asked. Loki could hardly say why it mattered that he know this, but it did.

Frigga rested her hand on the golden wall, and her gaze grew fond. “I think he would be,” she replied gently. Loki watched her go until she disappeared around the curve of the staircase, and then turned and left, lost in thought.

* 

He could hear splashing in the bathing room when he got back, and sighed. *If she doesn’t have a care, she’ll scrub all her skin off,* he thought, and set about disrobing. It was simple enough, with his magic; the pieces of golden armor unbuckling and unstrapping from around him, the green cape sweeping from his shoulders, all of it coming to rest on its stand in his wardrobe. In its place, comfortable black trousers and an emerald tunic of soft suede, the gold embroidery at the throat and on the sleeves glimmering in the light coming in through curtains that had been thrown open to the evening sky.

He spoke with the chamberlain to have their dinner brought up; he could not sit through another with Sif beside him, laughing and smiling for those present but without that sparkle in her eyes that he had long watched and coveted. They had much to speak of, in any case, and he would rather do it this way, where it could be the two of them, than try to engage her after the meal.

But if she was bathing, it would be some time yet, so Loki took himself to one of the comfortable seats just inside the patio and pulled some of the unread missives out of their magical storage space. No use in dawdling on things getting done, and the attendants who brought up dinner were good enough at their tasks not to disturb him as they laid the table and departed.

He did not have the tracking skills of their erstwhile companions, but Loki had developed the ability of memorizing a person’s step long ago, of being able to hear things that others could not, and so even though her feet were near-silent on the floor, he heard Sif approach behind him.

“You had dinner brought?” she asked. Loki set the missive he was reading aside – it was a hideously boring yet highly necessary message regarding the continued upkeep of Asgard’s legions – and rose, going to her.

“I have no desire to bandy words with some grasping lord tonight.” They sat at the table, and this time it was Loki who but picked at his food, though the boar was savory and the vegetables served with it steamed to perfection. It was simply such a delicate situation, one that he was not used to having to handle and had no knowledge or preparation for, but it could not wait until he had retreated and regrouped and come up with a strategy.

“Being a king,” he said at last, “Is a lot more tiresome than I thought it would be.”

Sif looked up at him, eyebrow quirked. It reminded him rather painfully of how she’d look at him
before a quest or when she knew he was enhancing the truth somewhere.

“My deepest apologies that the task is not what you expected,” she replied.

“There is simply much more at play than I was aware of.” He picked up his goblet, studying the elegant scrollwork around the rim. “It seems those who are less than friendly to us seek to test the new king. The Allfather commanded their fear and respect. I do not.”

“Will you talk to them?”

“I am thinking their tests will take a less diplomatic route than that, though t’would be fortunate if they did. In a war of words, we both know I am the clear favorite.” Sif’s lips twitched, and it spurred Loki on; she may have fallen into despair, but she was not so deep that mirth had left her entirely.

“Do you think it will come to war, as it nearly has with Jotunheim?”

“I think if it does not I will not be the only one surprised.” Loki chose his words carefully here; Sif was not as subtle as he, but her instinct and intuition were great. It was a small manipulation, and for the benefit of all, and yet… “Asgard will need its warriors to be at their peak. All its warriors.”

She did not miss the point; he saw her shoulders tense. “Queens do not do battle,” she said, and beneath the tightness, he heard longing. He had seen how she brushed her fingers over the silver and maroon of her armor; how she kept her weapons sharp, though those were the only times she had grasped them since the day of their wedding.

“No,” he agreed. “But you do.”

Sif gave him a flat stare. “I have no patience for your word games now, Loki—“

“You are a warrior, Sif, and a queen.” His tongue felt thick, as unskilled as when he had been a boy and one of the girls at court had come up and shyly kissed him on the mouth and he had been so startled by it he’d retreated for the safety of his mother’s skirts as she and her friends giggled. “You are both, not only one or the other.”

She set her fork down, fingertips resting on the gold utensil. “It is true…”

“Sif…” He opened his mouth, closed it again. “I have never known you to succumb to what you were supposed to do, to have more than a perfunctory consideration for what was expected of a lady of the court.”

“I never wanted to be queen either,” she said hotly. “But I could not watch you become a stranger before my own eyes. I did what my realm expected of me, I came to protect it—”

“But not in the way you are best at. We must play to our strengths – mine is with words. Yours is with a sword.” And then, before he could think to recall it, he said, “It is where you belong – not just in those gowns the couturiers keep throwing at you, as lovely as you are in them, but in your armor with your glaive in hand. I would see you thus again, even if I must spend my days settling disputes between Lord Erik and Lord Edvard over whose sheep knocked down whose fences, and preparing for a battle that may never come.”

It was more truth than he had intended, but it had the desired effect. Sif pursed her lips in thought, watching him calculatedly. He simply sipped his wine, watching her over the rim of the goblet. “And who is supposed to entertain the ladies of the court?” she asked at last, carefully, as though she expected it to be one of his tricks. It was hurtful that she would think so, but understandable. Loki waved a hand.
“They may get Fandral to dance naked for them, for all the care I have. There is, of course, only one for whom I have something other than vague disdain.”

“Should I be concerned I am to be put aside?”

“Only if there is another dark-haired warrior woman in Asgard. I know of none, and it is my job to know what goes on in this realm. For example,” Loki leaned forward conspiratorially. “I can tell you with certainty that the weaponsmaster will be in the training ring at dawn tomorrow, and that he has been lamenting that there are none who are able to best him in combat since his best student left to sit at the side of her king and husband in Gladsheim.”

“I have done far too much sitting of late to be a worthy opponent for Jerod, ” Sif muttered, but that light was back in her eyes, had kindled small and tentative and hopeful as he spoke of playing to their strengths, and Loki felt his heart lift. Suddenly, the feeling of being on the edge of an abyss in his heart seemed less a reality than a nightmare, a thing that came in the dark and passed with the dawn’s breaking. She had tried to chain herself to ideas of what she ought to be doing, he thought, and in some ways so had he. Sif’s predicament was at least put more easily on the path to resolution than his own.

“I think perhaps you will find out otherwise.”

“Let us hope,” Sif said archly. “I shall have to work twice as hard to reach where I was when last I laid hands on my glaive.”

“I fear for the enemies of Asgard.” But Loki was pleased; she might not yet fully trust him – Odin’s beard, he didn’t precisely trust himself – but if what he had read in certain messages over the last month was a true thing, or at least what he had read between their careful lines of script, then Sif would be needed, for more than just her weaponry. The king and queen were the morale of their realm, and if one or both of them were dissatisfied, the realm would never be able to sustain itself.

Beyond that, though, it simply made him more pleased to see her begin to regain herself before she had broken, and before their marriage of convenience could become a prison in truth. He would not have her feeling he was a cage and she was some animal, held until she beat herself so many times against the bars that she accepted them.

That, he thought as they both tucked in to their food with more relish, would perhaps have been the greatest of his crimes.

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The next morning, he leaned on the wall bounding one of the small halls; it was not far up the great columns of the palace, but it afforded a rather spectacular view of the training yard. Sif shone brightly, for she had worn her full armor rather than just her training leathers – glad, perhaps, for the chance to do so even if he could tell she was yet wary of it being some ill-spirited trick on his part, or that it would be yanked away from her.

In the midst of a circle of opponents (all rather wary of striking their queen, it would seem, but more afraid of incurring her wrath if they went easily on her), her mouth curved up into that wolfish grin, Sif raised her glaive in a challenge. One by one they came, and then more at a time, until she had bested them all. Not as handily as before, perhaps, but the sight of it still set him aflame. They ought never have tried to harness war for their own ends, Loki thought. Once unleashed it could only be caged at the loss of its true power, and that would be the greatest possible blow to the realm.

Sif turned, feeling his eyes on her, and raised her glaive in a cocky salute. Loki raised his hand in
response.

At least one of us has found where we belong, he thought to himself.
Thank you all for continuing to read, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

*pathway*; in biochemistry, a metabolic pathway involves the step-by-step modification of an initial molecule to form another product.

Sif walked through the open door and crossed the receiving room, pulling her hair out of its ponytail as she went. “I don’t see why you can’t.”

Shutting the door behind them, and then the bedchamber door when they passed that, Loki held back a sigh of irritation. With her return to the training yards, Sif had gotten the bit back in her teeth about certain matters, and while he was glad to have her mind to work at problems – she was far cleverer than some gave her the credit for – betimes he wondered if she had not been put in the realms to drive him mad.

“The Bifrost is open now to official travel only,” he said, “Because our borders are not secure. We cannot have all and sundry going to Heimdall for passage, not when there is still a chance Laufey will seek retribution—”

“For an act *months* ago—“

“One that has resulted in all this upheaval!”

“It is not just upheaval between realms, Loki!” Sif turned to look at him, her brows drawn together in a dark line. “It is within our own! You may not have marked this from your high seat in Gladsheim, with your gaze turned outward to the edges of other realms, but you are yet ill-favored here at home!”

“Do you think I do not know it?” He stalked by her, pushing his hand at the fireplace in the center of the chamber as he passed it; flames leaped upward from the logs there, more brilliant and hot than they needed to be to ignite the wood. “The highborn peerage may be coming around – I have kept their mindless feasts and follies going and there is enough of a threat of war that they may strap on their armor and strut around – but Asgard is not only the highborn. Those who make the lifeblood of the city I have yet to win over.”

“Because things are not *normal,*” she insisted. “They have no quarrel with the succession – second or not you are a son of Odin, after all – but have you not walked among them?”

His voice turned suddenly icy, snappish. “Why should I? They do not love me, not as they love my father or my brother. If I walked among them it would only serve to make them hate me more for being neither.”

“How can you be so certain? You are king of Asgard now, not a petulant child whose play-yard friends have all left!” She ignored the sharp look she got at those words; Sif had her momentum going now and wasn’t going to let him stop it. “You and I both know better than most what it means to not be liked by all. You must *convince* them to like you, and not by force. Show them that you care more than a whit about them. Nobody wishes to feel like a pawn – powerless, yet moved about the board.”
The expression on his face at that did make Sif pause, for it was not one she’d seen before. Loki rarely let his guard drop even around her, though they shared a bed and a hearth. There were moments – a look of genuine emotion, a thickness to his words that were usually so smooth, a turn of his mouth that could be a smile if he loosened the reins but a little – but they were few and far between, and she had noticed so little in the time she had been lost to herself. This, though, this was far different than anything he had yet revealed to her. It was… unsure, almost, conveyed in the tilt of his eyebrows and the way he brought his thumb up to chew at the cuticle before deliberately dropping it.

“Loki?” she asked, setting aside the shoulder armor she’d been holding in her hand. “Loki, what is the matter?”

“Nothing,” he replied, too quickly. Sif ground her teeth.

“I only wish to help you. I may have come to our marriage through your mother’s words but I am no oathbreaker or jester to take it lightly, and if that is what you believe I think—“

“Don’t be absurd, Sif. I know you know I do not think such things.”

She sighed, some of her irritation at him gone (certainly not all of it, but some), and slowly reached out, putting her hands on his chest. Beneath the layers of leather and cloth she could feel his heart, beating rapidly. What, she wondered, made Loki lose his calm?

“Then do not treat me as a stranger,” she said, the edge still very much in her voice. “Do not make things like that day in the throne room, when you were much farther away than a set of steps.”

For a moment they stayed like that, until Loki put his hand on her shoulder and stepped away, clasping his hands behind his back. The shoulders of his jacket could not make it seem as though he were not bowed under the weight of the realms and Yggdrasil itself besides. “I do what I do in order to try and stabilize things here,” he said. “We may be pressed in by enemies but we are not even safe within the borders of Asgard, much less the greater empire.”

“So you take away part of normal life for the realm in order to get citizens to believe things are normal?” Sif knew he could probably tell what her expression was without even facing her. “Yes, it seems such sound logic, I have no idea how it could not possibly work.”

“Limiting travel via the Bifrost means that no enemies can get in, plant spies.”

“And it means that things are still amiss. Loki, it has been three months since Jotunheim. If the Frost Giants, or whatever enemies you think are at our gates were to launch an attack, they would have done so by now. Heimdall did not even know how those three got in at Thor’s coronation. If he did not know then, and we could not find out, then closing the Bifrost does nothing but keep the people on edge and prevent us from effectively using our own forces.”

“And you are a strategist now?”

“No, not like you are. But I know much of battle and enough of statecraft to know that what you are doing is hurting your cause.”

Loki said nothing, but as she watched his shoulders loosen a bit, the leather no longer stretched so tautly, Sif smiled just a little, and went back to stripping off bits of metal.

“Perhaps it is something that needs revisiting,” he admitted at last. “The situation is less dire than it was before, given that Laufey and I have each agreed to a stay. It needs resolution, but there have been many other matters.”
She finished putting away her armor and walked over, leaning on her forearms as she looked at him. “Things more important than this realm?”

“Things that could be very important to this realm, yes. I thought you might understand what it means to have many threads weaving together to one cloth.”

“Are you saying I do not?” Sif sucked on her lip in thought. “So there’s a lot at play.”

“More than anyone knows, I think. I am only getting pieces of it.”

“Then it is more important than ever that you stop the pot boiling here. We cannot be expected to defend ourselves, much less the other realms depending on our protection and oversight, if we’re unstable here.”

Loki gave her a strange look. “Have you been speaking to my mother?”

“We meet often. Why?”

“You are beginning to sound like her.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“I am beginning to think it is you women who have the true power in this place.”

Sif gave him a wolfish grin, and was pleased to see his lips lift just a bit in response. “Then perhaps you are actually learning something about being king, Silvertongue.”

“Perhaps.” The almost-smile faded again after a moment. “I know you would have me reopen the Bifrost… and return what was lost—“

“Don’t speak of your brother as though he is one of the lost treasures from your father’s vault. Loki, we need him to come back.”

“I have said I will consider it.”

“Stop considering and do something.” Sif pushed back from the edge and paced a few steps. “Or is it that you are loath to give up the kingship?”

“There is much to be done. Do you think Thor could handle the realms right now? Do you think he would do anything but make it worse? You saw what happened on Jotunheim—“

Sif made an exasperated noise, turning on him. “Why do you fixate on that? It cannot just be what happened with Thor!”

“It matters not—“

“Lies! It matters so much to you that it clouds everything else you do!”

Loki’s voice was frosty. “If you would let me finish a thought, please.” When Sif had gestured for him to go on, her brow taut and her eyes narrowed, he nodded and some of the anger in his face eased. “Thor is a matter that is delicate – Father banished him to Midgard to learn a lesson, stripped him of his powers and tied them to Mjolnir; if he regains Mjolnir it is possible that he will be able to return. That is not up to me to grant, and it is a magic older than even the oldest things I have mastered.”

“There must be a way…”
“Oh, I am certain there are ways, but what they are I could not say.”

“Do you swear it is not only because of your jealousy?”

Loki’s throat worked as he watched her, then he nodded once. “It is not only because of my jealousy.”

For a moment the tension stretched on between them, then Sif’s shoulders eased and she let her arms drop. “To get a master of deception and learning to admit that not only is he obvious in something he wishes to hide, but that there is something he does not know…”

“You are rather clever, you know, Sif.”

“Yes, I know.” She gave him a smile – still not completely trusting, but perhaps a little more than she was before. “It is well to hear it from you. Compliments from Loki Silvertongue are as precious as gems.”

“When one wants to make a piece of armor, one goes to a metalsmith.” Loki shrugged, but returned her smile. “They know their craft best.”

“Then should I ever be in need of fitting words, I will know who to ask for aid.” Sif turned and headed back into the cool dimness of their chambers, and Loki watched her go, the smile fading slowly from his mouth. Then, with a wave of his hand, he vanished from the balcony.

* 

The horse’s hooves clattered on the stones of the small courtyard, at the foot of the palace. It was growing noon, and the rider was hot in his livery, but the news he bore would not wait until the usual audiences with the king.

“Make way!” he cried, pushing through those going up the broad steps into this side entrance of the palace – an entrance still large enough for six horses to ride abreast through with room to spare between them. “Make way for a messenger to the king!”

“Yes, make all haste,” another liveried servant said. “The quicksilver king is like to be gone ere you reach the high seat – or perhaps his queen has bested him in battle again! Perhaps it is Queen Sif you ought to make your appeal to!”

The messenger managed to keep his face straight, if only because of his great hurry. The queen had been back in the training yards, doing things most considered distinctly not queenly, causing some the warriors to mutter if we are so desperate for warriors that we are making our queens do battle, perhaps we ought to be taking others too – crones, beardless boys, blushing maids… It was still best not to say such things within earshot of anyone loyal to the throne, though those were precious few in number. If such jests ever reached the ear of the queen herself, she was like to take the challenger to the yard and grind his face into the sand for the offense. As for the king… well, nobody wanted to anger him, but he was often gone somewhere – pacing the high places, they said, his lip caught between his long fingers. When he was needed he was absent, and when others would sooner keep their conversations to themselves he was there. Loki, King of Asgard, Lord of Trickery. The quicksilver king.

But to muse upon the merits of royalty and the many twists of succession rules was not the messenger’s duty, so he simply ran on, leaping up the winding steps through the public levels of the palace until he got to the hall of Gladsheim. Here at last he finally slowed, pausing to catch his breath and let the breeze coming off the water cool his sweaty body. Looking up, he saw that the king had
noticed him, one black eyebrow lifted in clear interest. Much to the messenger’s horror, the king held up a hand to stop the courtier who was speaking.

“I will hear the rest later, good Bern,” he said. “I believe I’ve a message of some import. Come forward, messenger, I will hear you, since you have run all this way to speak long ahead of your fellows.”

The hall was silent, save for the low sound of the breeze through the hanging curtains and the pillars of the hall. No one moved enough to rustle the fine fabrics of their clothes. Swallowing, the messenger stepped forward, walking across the gilded floor, approaching the high golden throne upon which the king reclined, a cup in hand and Gungnir clasped loosely in the other. Reaching the foot of the dais, he put his fist over his heart and knelt, bowing his head.

“My king, I bring you an urgent message.”

*  

An hour later, the messenger had been sent to the kitchens for a good meal and given a rest day to recover from his trip. Svartalfaheim might be under the purview of Asgard, but it was hardly a friendly place for Aesir to travel, particularly now. Loki, though, remained on the throne. He had forgotten his drink, and looked lost in thought, ignoring the rustling of the courtiers and other supplicants who had come to Gladsheim that day, and who now stood in small groups, speaking quietly.

He had been honest in his word — it was not only the jealousy he still harbored for his brother that motivated him. That was the larger part of it, and in that he had lied to Sif (a fact that stuck him like a pin, despite its necessity), but reasons of security and diplomacy had had their places too. Curt messages had been exchanged with Laufey, but Loki had yet to make a formal visit, and in no small part because he knew that when he went he would be facing his birth father. It was not something he wished to do yet, not with circumstances having changed so, but he had spoken the truth there — it needed resolution. Keeping the Bifrost closed had been part of the arrangement, a gesture on the part of Asgard to show that it was doing its part to keep its ruffian warriors from wreaking havoc on other realms, conquered or not. But it had had other repercussions, obviously; trade was difficult, as few other realms had the ability to travel between them, and when realms asked for aid it could not be easily rendered. Loki misliked being proved wrong on things he had done.

At long last he stood, the butt of Gungnir thudding loudly on the floor. Everyone stilled, all their faces turned toward him.

“Lords and Ladies of the court,” Loki said. “It has been a difficult season, and you all have weathered this storm with aplomb befitting your stations. Hear me now, then, and hear me well, for it is long past due that these words were spoken.

“Effective immediately, travel upon the Bifrost will be reopened as it was before, without restriction or special dispensation from the throne required. The circumstances are hardly normal, but it is for the good of Asgard that I do this, so that our people may regain their lives that had been interrupted these three months.” He paused, watching their faces carefully, marking reactions. “Long may Asgard reign.”

“Long may she reign!” came the response, accompanied by applause, and when he turned his ears to it, murmurs of approval.

*
Normally anyone storming through the palace with a naked blade in their hand would be stopped, questioned. It was not so with the queen. Her boot heels tapped staccato on the polished floors as she walked briskly through the corridors, her guard having to make haste to keep up with her. Sif had questioned the need for a personal guard at all, given that she could and had bested most of the palace guards at one point or another in training bouts, but it had been one of those things that had been given up for non-negotiable. She had instructed the guard not to get in her way unless she was dying, and he had seemed to take the promise seriously, at least.

“Where is he?” she demanded. “I won’t have him hiding from me again.”

The gold-cloaked guard she’d accosted, to his credit, kept himself from looking very perturbed at all. “He is in his receiving chambers, my queen, of course.”

Sif studied him a moment, then snorted. “Of course he is,” she replied, and kept going the way she had been. The guard shifted uneasily at his post.

“My lady, the king’s receiving chambers are—”

“I know my way around the palace,” he heard her call. “Remember to work on strengthening defense on your left side, it’s where you are weak.”

He stepped back into place, waiting until the sound of her footsteps had faded into the background noise of the palace before cracking a smile.

* * *

Sif had no illusions about her husband; of late, when it was said he was in his receiving chambers, he was more like to be anywhere but. She knew his haunts, at least – a certain alcove in the great library, some of the smaller archival rooms (one done in greens was his favorite), balconies overlooking the city, little gardens spread across the wider palace grounds. Methodical, she had checked each one, sweeping the palace from the level of Gladsheim upward. It was entirely possible Loki had known she was coming and had moved, but she doubted he would. When he didn’t want to be found, he had easier ways of escaping.

So it was that she found him on one of the balconies, looking out over the city as the afternoon light turned it to a riot of color. Gold and silver and bronze, bright sparkling blues and muted greens, and none of it as brilliant as the branches of Yggdrasil that twined across the skies; her home, her realm.

Bidding her guard stay at the door with the two unlucky enough to have to guard the king, Sif strode fully into the hall. It was a smaller one, the spaces between the pillars hung with long draperies that stirred lazily. For entertaining smaller groups of diplomats and their associates, or for holding private conversations with a trusted group of compatriots, or for…

“Hiding, Loki?”

He didn’t move, not even a ripple in his jacket to show he’d twitched. Beside him, Gungnir balanced without hand or magic (at least, without magic that was not innate, the dwarves always wrought with spells) to hold it. “Not at all.”

“What is the king of all Asgard doing up here, alone?”

“The king of all Asgard is not alone; his queen is with him.”

Sif rolled her eyes and closed the distance between them, standing at his side on the balcony. “Enough; you use words as deftly as Fandral uses his absurd rapier, and I comprehend neither one all
of the time.”

“Simply because words and rapiers are not as substantial as your glaive does not mean you should
denigrate either one. We all have our arenas.”

“Ones we operate quite well in without having to trudge through the others.” She watched him a
moment, following the profile of his face against the glowing veil of one of the branches spread
across the sky. “But versatility is a prized virtue in a warrior, and I have more skill in words than
most will give me credit for. So which are the ones that have sent you here?” When he did not
answer, Sif tilted her chin up. “I know you have had word from Svartalfheim. It must have been
important indeed.”

Loki glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then away. “You know that Asgard’s position as
supreme among the realms is not as secure as it was before. Father held them in hand for centuries,
and if they did not respect him they at least feared him. Without that, they are wondering if I am in
fact up to the task of keeping the realms in order, a thing that has necessitated much on my part.”

“So that was why you reopened travel on the Bifrost,” Sif said. “And why you’ve been sending
envoys to the other realms under our protection. I had thought you were listening to me for once.”

“It is little more than a way to stay any hands that may have been about to move. And you had quite
a good point.”

“I have said that you are not the only one who has learned some new things in the art of statecraft in
the midst of all this, dear husband. So what news from Svartalfheim?”

“The usual diplomatic niceties… and news of raids, by trolls most likely. The envoy did not say, but
asked for support in quelling them. It is not important enough to send a warrior of your caliber out
for,” he said, spotting the sudden gleam in her eyes. “Much less the queen of Asgard. I have sent the
Warriors Three out with what they say will be enough of the regular soldiers to put an end to it.”

“You had best send more,” Sif told him. “Or have you forgotten that they tend to boast?”

“I have not. But they, and the soldiers, have all been spoiling for battle. Perhaps this will not be such
a challenge for them.”

“I have no doubt.” Sif seemed to consider him a moment before reaching out, sliding her fingers over
the back of his hand before letting it drop again, in favor of gripping his lapels and yanking him
down to her level. “But find me a battle soon, or the exuberance of those three will be the least of
your worries.”

She was very close, her eyes gold-green in the light; Loki suppressed the urge to swallow, she could
see the battle on his face. “How could I deny such a fair suit?” he said at last, hands on her forearms.
“It would be uncommonly cruel, even for me.”

“So you admit to being cruel?”

The distance between them had shrunk. When had that happened? “I admit I have the propensity…”

Sif was close enough for him to feel the little puffs of air on his mouth from her words. “Oh, do
you?” she murmured. “Perhaps I shall see for myself, then…”

Their lips met – at long last, it seemed, for it jolted them both. Sif was not soft and yielding but hard,
her armor solid, her kiss demanding something she herself had not known for certain she’d wanted.
A rare thing for her to admit even to herself, a lack of surety on anything, but as her arms wound
around Loki’s shoulders it seemed more right, more needful than ever. His hands were in her hair and it almost made her balk, memories of night and a flash in the dark filling her mind before the next kiss chased them away, his fingers tightening and pulling at her scalp.

Her back hit one of the pillars suddenly and Sif broke away to gasp in surprise, nails digging in to leather. Then Loki was lifting her up and she suddenly remembered that though he did not bulge with muscle as Thor or the other warriors did, he was strong, his hands gripping her thighs and his body pinning her in place with its weight. Their kisses took on a note of urgency.

Sif locked her ankles, lips curled back as he found a sensitive place on her throat and worked at it when he heard the noise she made. Head buzzing, she sent one hand between them, over his chest and torso to where she could feel him hard through the trousers he wore, and snarled in frustration when her fingers did not easily find the laces to free him. Why he had to wear so many thrice-damned layers of leather and fabric and—

There was a sudden clatter of armor and hurried, raised voices. “My lord, I—“

“Can it not wait?” Loki snapped. The guard, realizing what he had interrupted, went pale and then pink and then turned away.

“They—they said it was urgent, my king, and sent me right away. I can return…”

“No,” Sif said, releasing her ankles and sliding back down to stand on her toes. Her whole body throbbed with need, but the moment for it had passed. She would wait. “Deliver your message. The king may await my pleasure later, I shan’t keep you.”

Loki gave her a very hurt look which she considered to be almost genuine, but stepped back to a slightly less distracting place, though his hands remained low on her hips. Sif kissed him again and slipped out of his arms, collecting her guard on the way out. He handed her back her weaponry.

“Are we returning to the royal chambers, my queen?” he asked. Sif weighted the sword in her hand, thinking for a moment. The sound of Loki’s voice echoing out of the hall behind her – calm, but carrying an edge of annoyance at having been interrupted – made her grin.

“Later. I believe there may yet be guards I have not bested.”

“Not for long, my lady.”

“No,” Sif agreed as they started back down to the ground level. “Not for long.”

*

There wasn’t any point to trying to keep their failed attempt at a tryst secret; even though the personal guards of the king and queen were the most trustworthy the barracks had to offer, they still talked, and so the attendants who brought dinner in to their chambers had knowing smiles on their faces as they set the trays down and left quickly.

The hot dishes were long cold and forgotten, but now, loose-limbed and sated and comfortably ensconced against Loki’s side, they were the last thing on Sif’s mind as she leaned forward and snagged the slice of melon out of his long fingers. He was cool, but her body yet burned and hummed with pleasure, so the chill of the juice running down her throat and over her chin was welcome.

“You are a messy eater,” Loki said. Sif tilted her head a little so he could lick the juice away and then kiss her. It made him taste sweet. She wasn’t sure she liked that.
They lay there as the skies darkened and the brilliance of the Branches took over, the city coming alight too with its own inner glow. Words were Loki’s domain, but Sif communicated with actions and found he was no slouch there either, a fact that pleased her very well.

When it was full night and they had quieted, drifting in that content lassitude that comes to so many lovers, Loki cleared his throat, and Sif stilled her fingers from where they had been sliding back and forth over his arm.

“You may be pleased with this or you may not,” he said, “But I have decided it is past time that we put the matter of Jotunheim to rest.”

“Good,” Sif said, wondering why he’d brought this up now, rather than tomorrow. *He’s probably going to ask something outrageous of me,* she thought. *It would be like him to ply me with his mouth and his body and then ask me something I would not otherwise even consider.*

“I mean to send word to Laufey on the morrow, suggesting the meeting. It is to be an official visit from the King of Asgard to the King of Jotunheim, but it would be unwise to bring the usual detachment of guards, given our… turbulent history.”

“Yes, the sight of golden cloaks marching across that wasteland to Utgard might make a bad impression,” Sif said dryly. “Yet you cannot go alone.”

“I can,” Loki insisted stubbornly. “But I won’t. Risky though it might be I intend to bring you, if you will come.”

Sif sat up – the press of his side against her body bearing too much of a distraction – and eyed him. “You want both rulers of Asgard to walk into an openly hostile realm, without any guard or other warriors whatsoever.”

“Come now, Sif,” and she scowled at the tone he used, the same he’d used to talk all of them out of trouble more times than she could remember. “Do you think the two of us together could not vanquish all of Jotunheim if we wanted to?”

“I think that the last time we were there, a massive great beast came after us and shattered the very ground of the realm and we barely made it out with our skin intact, and that was with Thor and the Warriors Three. In fact the only reason we made it out at all is that you tattled to the guard about it.”

“And that was helpful, wasn’t it?”

“If that is what you think.” Sif pursed her lips. “Why alone? Why not bring the guards?”

“Because a gesture of good faith must be made. I cannot think of anything better than both of us putting our well-being in the control of Jotunheim. At least, to let them think it is.” He leaned back, and pulled her with him so her hair fell in a dark curtain around their faces. “There is much to work out, politically, before this visit happens, so you will have time to augment your considerable skills to make sure our lives are safe in your very capable hands.”

“Flattery to deflect me will only work up to a point, Loki.”

“Then I pray I have not yet reached it,” he replied, and kissed her.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for continuing to read!

*catalyst*; the change in rate of a chemical reaction due to the participation of a substance called a catalyst.

The messenger, bearing a missive sealed with gold wax and stamped with Loki’s seal and the seal of Asgard, departed for Jotunheim the next day. Sif watched him ride toward the Observatory from above. So much rode upon one man, one sheet of parchment with whatever words Loki had seen fit to use.

He had risen before her, his kisses drawing her from sleep. There had been something in them, some edge of urgency and need that had made her sit up and look at him in sleepy curiosity to ask what troubled him. He’d insisted it was only thoughts of what to write to best convey the message needed, of how his suggestion would be received by Laufey and the rest of the peerage of Jotunn royalty.

“Or what passes for it, anyway,” Sif had muttered against his mouth. Loki had gone still under her hand, almost drawing away from her lips, but then had kissed her again.

“They’re more complex than ours, to be honest,” he’d said. “But you’ll see.” Then he had vanished before she’d had a chance to ask for clarification, and she had not seen him the rest of the morning, even from a distance (he had confessed the night before that watching her train was one of the many things that attracted him to her, and the fact he could not meet her eyes directly when saying it put it squarely in the realm of ‘true’ for her), and Sif had not gone looking for him. Whatever his thoughts were on all this, they would remain his own until he decided to share them. In stubbornness, she and Loki were remarkably alike. Really he was worse, for he too often kept to himself things that needed to be shared, holding them as one might hold pieces in a game of strategy.

Whatever was in his mind, Sif thought, she would know it sooner or later. Jotunheim might take a few days to consider the offer but it was truly a fair one, better than they deserved after the attempt at theft they had made at Thor’s coronation. That was a mystery yet unsolved, and one she intended to see made clear. Her half-brother could see a single grain of sand on one of the beaches of Midgard; Sif refused to think that he would not be able to see the path three Jotunns took to get into the very heart of the palace.

* The following days presented a flurry of messengers going back and forth from Jotunheim. Loki was tense; they all were. What happened between the two realms determined the fate of them both, beyond the rash actions of the former first prince. Sif watched each one come and go, talked with some of them herself. This could be the key to bringing her friend home where he belonged, rather than wandering a realm of mortals, even if he could never ascend the throne.

Nothing of Laufey’s true intentions were ever revealed to the messengers, of course, and they always told Sif they were treated well, if with a somewhat chilly demeanor, so to speak. No Jotunn had much love for any Asgardian, and perhaps rightfully so.
Waiting was not something Sif did well, though. She threw herself back into her training, gaining her edge back and honing it to a deadly sharpness. If she was to be the only one accompanying her husband on this ridiculous errand, she would make sure she prepared for anything.

She didn’t have to wait long, at least. The final word came not long after the first flurry of messages.

“They’ve agreed.”

Sif looked up from where she’d laid her knives out on an old piece of cloth on the floor of their suite, hands suddenly still from where she’d been sharpening one. The smell of oil was heavy in the air, and the smell of the fireplace nearby an overtone to it, but despite the warmth of the flames she had suddenly gone cold.

“You have heard from Laufey, then?” she asked, hands going back to their work though she paid little mind to it. Loki’s lips thinned to a line and he knelt beside her, taking the knife out of her hands and laying it carefully on the cloth.

“He has agreed to a meeting on the morrow.” His fingers closed over hers, drawing her to stand with him. “I have sent word confirming that you and I will arrive without any entourage.”

“Trusting of you,” Sif told him, but she gripped his hands, letting him pull her toward the bed, the corners of her lips curving up.

“Laufey seemed eager.” Loki’s hands cupped her jaw, tilting it up so he could kiss her.

There was something, some strange quality to the way his mouth moved against hers, that made her pull back and look at him. “What’s wrong?”

Something flickered deep in his eyes. “Nothing. I have simply looked forward to this all day.”

“You needn’t have waited.”

“I have never wanted my gratification instantly.” He kissed her again and Sif put her arms around his neck, pulling their bodies flush. So different, she thought. She always went after what she wanted relentlessly until she got it, and not to delay it, so she was the one who pushed him to the bed, yanking at his tunic until he laughed and helped her take it off so she could run her hands over his chest. “But of course,” he said, reaching up to bury his hands in her hair and pull her mouth to his. “I know my lady is not the same.”

Sif grinned down at him, fingers moving from his chest to his cheeks. “You’re right, of course,” the warrior murmured, rubbing her thumbs across his high cheekbones as she leaned down to make sure his clever mouth was put to better purposes than speaking. “She isn’t.”

* * *

The couturiers had fashioned a fine coat for her, the soft leather dyed emerald green and the hood and hems trimmed in tawny fur, but it was her familiar old one that she slipped on, the dove-grey one she had worn on more quests than she could recall at once. The new one reminded her strongly of Fandral; she had no desire to look the part of a dandy, and thinking of her friends raised a dull ache. She missed having adventures with the Warriors Three and the two brothers, missed the way things had been before in the way one might miss a summer spent in the mountains. Things were changing – had already changed – and Sif had resolved to change with them. Though not entirely; the attendants had tried to come in to dress and arm her but Sif had sent them away irritably. She had been doing this for centuries, and had not forgotten how to dress herself for an actual outing in the cold just because she had royal status. The only new thing to it was her helm, and that was hardly
something she needed help with.

Loki came into the room, his fur-lined gloves in hand. He looked paler than usual, though perhaps that was the fact he was swathed neck to toe in black leather and green cloth, only his mail and his gold collar shining brightly in the whole outfit. Yet Sif was no expert at reading people and certainly not at reading her husband, but even she could see a strange tightness about his eyes and mouth that belied whatever was churning about under the surface.

“It is unwise to go into battle preoccupied,” she said, walking over to the cloth-covered table where she’d laid her weapons out the night before and surveying her collection with a critical eye. “I expect you to be able to look after yourself in this, too.” Sif picked up a dagger, eyed the edge, and then slid it into its sheath and into her boot.

“My lady has such confidence in me,” Loki replied dryly as he watched, “Though since she apparently intends to be a walking arsenal, I really ought to have no need to prepare my own defenses.”

“You ought to sharpen your tongue a little more, so you may slice attackers to pieces with the edge.”

“I believe my words are keen enough already. Or they will be, should the need arise.” For a moment that tightness was back, but vanished quickly, and Sif was left wondering what it was that so troubled him that he would slip in such a way.

She turned back to her weaponry. Another dagger – one Loki had gifted her when their marriage was announced to the court, a surprisingly practical gift in a sea of uselessness – found its way into the sheath at the small of her back. “I’m surprised you have not scripted the whole thing out in your mind.” One last one in her other boot, then, and she picked up her collapsed glaive and her shield at last and secured them to her back.

“Who said I hadn’t?”

“Nobody.” Sif rolled her shoulders to make sure her movement wasn’t restricted in any way, then at last mentally declared herself ready. “You seem unlike yourself. Surely Laufey will be accepting of our terms and this is just a formality?”

“Do not underestimate Jotunheim,” Loki said as they made for the door, Sif tucking her helm under her arm as she went. “Laufey has ruled for longer than either of us has been alive, and is wise and cunning for it.”

“He did not seem such, when last we were there,” Sif replied as they made their way through the golden halls. “Either way, he must realize we outclass Jotunheim. If they resist your silver words, then there are other means of persuasion.”

Loki’s silence made her glance over. He had always been the quiet one, given to introspection, but their marriage had given her new insight into the many ways he communicated without words, and those ways were easier for her to read, for she had already learned much when reading an opponent. There were the glances, the smirks, the slight shifts in posture or body language. Then there were the silences, and those she was more than familiar with. There were judgmental silences and thoughtful silences and even impassioned silences, like there had been last night, where it seemed all the words he did not know how to say had come tumbling out without having ever been spoken. But this was a troubled silence, and it worried Sif, for if something troubled Loki and they were setting out for Jotunheim, it could not bode well for their business… not to mention being kept out of the loop by her own husband did not please her in the least.
“If it comes to that, then things will become much more complicated,” Loki said at last. It was not a reply, but his expression said that there would be no more information forthcoming. “So let us hope it does not.”

Sif ground her teeth. “Preoccupation and ignorance are the worst things to carry into battle,” she told him. “I do not like going into this without knowing what you know. I should know, if you truly see me as your equal in this.”

The look he gave her made Sif glad they were alone in the corridor; their guards were down with the horses, and the usual retinue of attendants had been dismissed by her after they’d tried again to buckle on her armor for her. Loki would not have shown her this expression otherwise, as conscious of his surroundings and the people around them as he always was. Tight and bleak, as though there were some great weight on his shoulders that he could not share. She blinked and it was gone, replaced with a more general look of long-suffering, but the image stuck with her as they descended to ground level.

The palace here was more open; people could come and go, and many did, for all the repositories of the highest knowledge were in the palace, and many of the peerage could hold meetings in the rooms on these levels. Most corridors funneled into Gladheims, but off them one could find sitting rooms, small meeting halls, and the most commonly visited libraries. The larger, more important ones were farther up in the fluted towers, but those required permission to visit, and the general populace of Asgard did not frequent them.

There were special entrances and exits for residents of the palace, and it was from one of these that Loki and Sif emerged into a sunny courtyard full of guards milling about on their horses. Why they needed an escort to the Bifrost Observatory – it was perhaps a ten-minute gallop, one both of them had ridden before unguarded – Sif didn’t know. It was depressingly tedious to deal with them, but at least the palace guards were efficient. As soon as their king and queen emerged they ranked up – two rows of three abreast, behind the stablehands holding the reins of their horses.

As her husband mounted up, Sif paused and pulled on her helm. This was the only formal headwear she liked, for it was also actually functional, unlike Loki’s preposterous horned one; the gap in the front for her face had sculpted points coming down from the center brow and up from the ends of the cheek guards, made to look like the maw of a great dragon. Ridges in the silver metal took the shape of elongated eyes, sweeping back into the faintly feathered wings that curved up and out from her head. It had a fierce appearance to it, and she’d made sure that the wings were designed in such a way as to not allow an opponent’s weapon to be able to catch. If she had to wear something like this on her head, she wanted it to be of use.

When Sif mounted her grey courser, though, she perceived another function – the guards’ eyes all snapped to her, and she could see flickers of awe and respect in their faces, the kinds of things that the leader of soldiers ought to inspire in those that followed them. It made her smile, tight-lipped. Well and so; she was their leader, in a way, even if her blades had not seen battle since Jotunheim.

“Let’s go,” Loki said, turning his chestnut’s head toward the arch leading out of the courtyard. Sif moved to his side, and as they broke into the wide grounds surrounding the palace and moved onto the glittering stone of the bridge, it was she who set the pace. It felt good to have the wind in her hair again when too often it was bound up.

As they passed through the city, Sif became aware that people stopped what they were doing on the broad balconies that paralleled the bridge. The ground itself was far below, but the buildings were terraced here. When their group came into view people would press against the edges of the terraces, watching with interest or curiosity or, in some cases, suspicion, but those were rare. The children
were the ones who waved, and when she got a chance, Sif lifted her hand to them as well. Not everyone in Asgard was often able to catch more than a glimpse of their king and queen, she reminded herself. It gave them heart to see her and Loki pass by. The buildings fell away soon, the bridge continuing on its unerring path toward Heimdall’s Observatory. The huge golden gates parted at their approach and they thundered through, galloping swiftly over the ocean that fell off the edge of the world.

They reined up outside the Observatory and dismounted, giving the reins of their mounts to two of the guards and proceeding inside. Heimdall was already on the pedestal, fingers crossed over the pommel of his sword. They exchanged a quick glance; between her and her half-brother the bonds of family were out of necessity not as strong as those in the house of Odin, but Sif had always admired him and his dedication to his duty, and Heimdall had in turn always offered what he could to help a maiden who wanted to be a warrior. He had been the first she had told of the plan she and Frigga had hatched to rein in their new king who seemed to be spiraling out of control too quickly, and while he did not entirely approve, he knew that his approval was not something Sif needed to justify or even determine what her actions were. Still, her spirits were bolstered.

She and Loki went to stand before the pedestal, as they had a dozen times before. Perhaps subconsciously, they had left space before them for Thor, Sif realized, and her heart clenched. Behind her, the slide of metal on metal, and the low throbbing hum of the Bifrost started up, buzzing in the back of her skull.

“Alert the guards if anything goes awry,” Sif said, and then caught the look that Loki gave her this time. It was the most hostile one he’d turned on her in months, and for a moment she was taken aback.

“Nothing will,” Loki said. “Keep your eye on us if you wish, Gatekeeper.”

Sif did not have to look to imagine the expression on Heimdall’s face. He was bound by honor and duty and an oath to serve the king of Asgard, but he did not have to like it, she realized. He had never had much love for Loki anyway, for whatever reason that was.

She felt a tug at the base of her spine, and thoughts of Heimdall and favor and kingship fled for a moment as she hurtled through space. As ever Loki was just visible beside her, a streak of darkness in the blinding light of the Bifrost that sustained them for the trip between stars. But before when she had traveled with him and the Warriors Three and Thor there had been the flutter of anticipation, of adventure in her veins, of the promise of glory to be won. She had little knowledge of the skills of diplomacy. This time, all she felt was trepidation.

Don’t get distracted when you land, she reminded herself, the words so familiar they had become a sort of mantra. Reach to your core for strength, bend your knees—

The Bifrost left lights dancing in her eyes as it was abruptly replaced by the blue-white twilight of Jotunheim when their feet slammed into the ground. Sif blinked the spots away and drew the sleeves of her jacket down a little more on her wrists. This realm was disquieting enough to her on its own without the weight of recent memory; to make it more uncomfortable to be present here was not something Sif wanted to do. Loki’s skin had taken on an eerie blue cast, but the light and the chill here washed everything out. Sif unclamped her shield from her back and made certain her collapsed glaive was ready if she needed it. Loki took no such precautions, but she saw his fingers twitch slightly, and by that she knew that his unease was no act.

“Let’s go,” she said, echoing his words of earlier, and they moved on.

The ground had repaired itself from their previous outing here, and her boots skidded on the new ice
not yet covered in a layer of snow. Sif ground her teeth when she slipped to one knee for the second time, but leaped up lightly enough when it seemed she had come face to face with a Jotunn, supine on the ground and grinning before her. Her sword hilt was in her grip before Loki put a hand on her arm and pointed. Two globes of green light went out from his fingertip to illuminate what was obviously a statue carved of dark ice and fallen to the ground.

“Jumpy today,” he remarked, but there was a tension in his voice that made the jest fall flat.

“This place freezes my blood.” Sif let him help her gain her footing and they pressed on. “I would hope you intend for our business to conclude quickly, Loki, for I find I have less and less patience with Jotunheim with every minute. Though I did not know their artisans had such skill.” She kept an eye on the statue until they had passed out of sight.

“I’ve found drawings of Utgard scribed in books from before the Great War.” Loki looked all around as they walked on, some of the tension melting into his usual perceptive curiosity. “Their craftsmanship was not like that of Asgard, of course, but it was grand and developed in its own way. Few texts mention much beyond the brutality of Jotunheim’s legions, it seems.” That edge again; it made Sif wonder. It was not sympathy – indeed Loki seemed unusually obvious in his distaste, and she oft wondered if he had the capacity to empathize with anything or anyone – but something else entirely.

Still, his words did little to assuage her mood. “They did not need to mention anything else,” she said. “That was all that is necessary to know – and it is true, after all. Jotunns are brutal and monstrous and have no honor.” Perhaps it was good she was so focused on the path ahead, for she could not see that through his tension was a thread of hurt, for the barest of moments.

The Jotunns had not rebuilt much, if indeed they had at all, but there was a recently-cleared path through the rubble of the old city. Their way was obviously prepared; good, in case they needed to make a hasty retreat, but bad as well for then it would be obvious what road they would take. These things and more ran through Sif’s mind as they approached the court of Laufey.

It was not like the last time; then they had all been brash and full of the desire to fight, even Loki, who had seemed so withdrawn in the weeks leading up to Thor’s coronation. Now Sif’s heart beat fast with something more like wariness. Never fear, though she was not fearless, but a kind of unease that had grown in her heart since the morning. Loki seemed more composed at least, the pallor of his skin only making the stark lines of jaw and cheek show more strongly.

They were greeted by two lines of warriors flanking the aisle to the throne in such a way that Sif was reminded of the throne room of Asgard. She and Loki walked between them and she kept her back straight and her head held high as they came to stand before Laufey and made their manners.

“I bid you welcome,” Laufey said. His voice was gravelly and dark. “Though I admit surprise that you’ve honored your agreement to come without guards, Loki Silvertongue.”

“The house of Odin keeps its contracts,” Loki replied, though there was enough of sarcasm in the reply to make even Sif raise an eyebrow at him. Some deeper meaning was conveyed there, she was sure of it, and when Laufey snorted – apparently in on the joke – she bristled, but held her tongue and her position.

“So it does,” Laufey replied. “And yet it was one of that house that broke a truce that had lasted for thousands of years. Perhaps the blood of the Allfather has been diluted in his sons.”

“Thor has paid the price for his stupidity.” Loki’s eyes were emerald chips, though his tone was even enough. “And for his rudeness in violating the sanctity of your realm. As a sign of Asgard’s
continued goodwill toward the realm of Jotunheim, I am here to renegotiate the terms of the truce. Enough time has passed that perhaps further... accommodations can be made."

"We do not ask for the pity of Asgard," Laufey replied. "We want none of its scraps thrown to us from the high table as though we were dogs."

"It is not pity that moves my hand to this," Loki insisted, spreading his hands and pacing a bit before the throne. "It is the desire to make amends for the actions of one of our own – of a Prince of Asgard, no less – and continue to allow our two realms to avoid warring with each other. Surely you can see the benefit of such an arrangement?"

"And if I do not, then what? Will you call us before your throne? Send forth your legions? Perhaps you’ll send your queen to lead them." Laufey turned his eyes to Sif, who felt her muscles go taut.

"Wouldn’t that be a sight."

"We only seek to avoid open war. My brother’s actions were foolish, and wronged you and your realm greatly. We both know that Jotunheim no longer possesses the means to travel between realms without the aid of the Bifrost; it would require someone else with powerful magic, and I know your skilled mages were all lost in the war. None of them had such intimate knowledge of Asgard, either, to sneak them in."

Something stirred in the back of Sif’s mind, some inkling that she had suddenly gained a very important and very troubling piece of information. Bits swirled around her mind, fueled by the sudden, sharp look that passed between her husband and Laufey, and the sly expression that took over the Jotunn king’s face afterward. Her brow furrowed, and she looked at Loki with uncertainty, for the place her thoughts led was a dark one, and not one she wanted to believe was true at all.

"You know much, Loki, lord of mischief," Laufey said slowly. "But what do you know of what Jotunheim would demand?"

"Asgard is prepared to offer reparations in the form of easing of certain terms of my father’s truce, and certain provisions to be made for travel—"

Diplomacy might not have been her arena, but even Sif was not surprised when Laufey growled, clearly disgruntled. "Asgard is not what it used to be in the time of your father, boy," he said. "Your people have grown arrogant, your warriors complacent. You could not lead a realm through war if your very life depended upon it. Why would you then think that we could not simply break your truce wholly? There is nothing we fear from you if we do—"

"Perhaps not from us," Loki replied delicately. "But I am certain one of your… standing has heard the latest?"

More secrets, and Sif only felt her irritation rise when Laufey paused, then nodded. "The signs are difficult to miss for those who have seen them before."

Difficult to miss, Sif thought, except for those who had no idea what they were talking about.

"Which is why our continued partnership is so important," Loki pressed on. "Asgard—"

"—will soon have its own problems to handle." Laufey sat back, regarding her husband coldly. "We want none of your honeyed words or your so-generous, condescending decision to loosen our chains enough to give us false hope that they will one day fall away—no, I will not hear your terms, I will not have your attempts to make amends. Do you think I do not know what kind of things you have learned at the knee of your father, boy? Do you think I am so blind to Odin’s secrets?"
(Later, when she sat in her chambers alone and replayed the entire conversation up to that point, Sif could mark the moment something in Loki snapped. It had been that question, and though Laufey had been about to go on, what had happened then had stilled his tongue.)

Loki’s hands moved in a wide circle, the motions to summon something out of whatever space it was he kept his trinkets in. Except this was no mere trinket; this was the Casket of Ancient Winters itself. Sif had only seen it once, when she had been taken to the weapons vault with the rest of her class of warriors-in-training, to look upon the treasures therein. The Infinity Gauntlet, the Eye, the Eternal Flame, Mjolnir before Thor had claimed it… and the Casket, pulsing a malevolent blue on its pedestal before the glowing lattice. What Loki was doing with it here she had no idea; it belonged safe, in the vault, not in the very heart of the place it had been taken from at the end of the War.

But those thoughts stilled—all thought, really, for as she watched, sword now in hand and ready to be extended, a curious thing began to happen to her husband. At first she thought it the change in light and shadow caused by the Casket’s glow, but as the strange scars rose on the backs of his hands, and then as the blue-gray color crept up his throat and across his face…

The realization hit her like a strike to the gut and hurt just as much; and as his eyes bled into an almost luminous crimson, the last part of his change, the first thought she had was not disgust (a reasonable reaction from any warrior of Asgard, grown on stories of the Great War) but a deep sense of betrayal. Not just because the one ruling Asgard was one of its own enemies under some kind of glamour, but because for months she had confided in him, slept beside him at night, taken pleasure from his caresses and allowed herself to trust him a little again after that disaster of a coronation, and had only been repaid with a lie so profound she could not begin to comprehend it. The air in Sif’s lungs had turned to ice, and her heart seemed encased in it for all that it did its work pumping the blood through her veins.

At least she was not alone in her surprise. Laufey sat back suddenly in his throne, a hand going up to his chin, and the other giants shifted uneasily behind them.

“I know your capacity for illusions, Trickster,” the Jotunn king said slowly, though Sif did not believe it (as much as she wanted to) and clearly, neither did Laufey. “I know you can assume whatever shape you want, make things appear to be what you want them to be.”

“So I thought.”

“I had thought my son lost,” Laufey said slowly. “That you barbarian Asgardians—no matter what skin you wear that is what you are at your core—had slaughtered him. I see they surpass even their own capacity for brutishness.”

“Fine words,” Sif whispered, but her voice trembled and she could not stop it. It made her angry—especially, at Loki, at even the Allfather himself. She was War, she did not tremble or quail before anyone, and yet here she was, shaking like a new foal finding its legs. War always knew what it was. No questions.
Laufey’s eyes snapped to her, as did Loki’s. “Do the actions of your Allfather surprise you, Warrior Queen?” Laufey asked. “For it could only be Odin who spirited you away, Loki, who hid you from my sight.”

“That is not what we came here to discuss,” Loki said, and with a wave of his hand the Casket vanished. Something ugly rose up in Laufey’s eyes as it did, but he did not make any mention or motion to act upon it, and even if he had Sif would not have trusted herself to move from her spot except to be blown astray in the winds. She was like a tree on an eroded bank.

“I think,” Laufey replied, “It will play a role.”

The rest of it passed in a strange way – speeding up, then slowing down. One moment Loki and Laufey were discussing the terms of mutual aid between the realms, the next they were arguing over the Casket’s return to Jotunheim, and the next Loki was putting his once-again pale hand on her arm and turning her about, directing them to leave the way they came. Sif made a hasty bow – Laufey seemed entirely too smug about something, and that did not sit well with her at all.

They passed in silence through the court, and back through the wastes of the ruined ice world, and for that she was grateful. Sif could not have spoken if she had wanted to.

*

The hum of magic and machinery spooling down was still loud in her ears when at last her tongue loosened and Sif rounded on Loki in the Observatory chamber. “What in the name of Hela’s bony—”

“Sif,” Loki began, but she cut him off with a violent gesture of her hand. Heimdall (perhaps wisely) retreated to the entrance of the Observatory, but not before giving her a strange, unreadable look. She heard his voice rumbling out to the guards, telling them to ready the horses but stay back. If there was a reply from them Sif did not hear it, too focused and wrathful was she.

“You did not think, not once in all these months, that telling me of your true parentage was necessary?” Sif’s hands clenched. “You kept what you are from me – from all of Asgard – and don’t tell me you didn’t know, you knew since Jotunheim, you knew—”

“It was kept from me my whole life, and—“

“And I suppose you think that makes it all right?” Sif felt another rush of hot rage. “That because a wrong was done to you that it’s all right to keep on with it?” She snorted, grinding her jaw. “How typical of you, Loki, you could hold a grudge for centuries if given the chance—“

“Would you have done differently?” Loki snarled suddenly. “Would you have not been angry at those who claimed for thousands of years to be your blood, your kin, who professed their false love for you, when you were never truly anything more than a pawn in a game played out by a man who put himself far above the ones he manipulated and placed others where the most good might be had? It was a game worthy even of me, Sif, and—“

“That was never—“

“Oh but it was.” Loki’s face had twisted into a specter of darkness, anger and suffering in every line that stood out in the stark Observatory light. “Odin himself told me it was so – that he had hoped to use his captured Jotunn princeling as a bargaining chip so that when it came time he could broker a lasting peace. But he waited too long. Now I am nothing to him, and all because of Thor’s actions —“
“You are king!” Sif shouted at him, her face hot. “You have everything Thor would have had, the realms, the titles—“

Loki’s face went darker still. “You.”

“Do not derail this, Loki, for once in your life,” Sif’s eyes bored into his as she advanced toward him, step by step, and he backed away. “Thor would never have had—“

“No! Can you not see it all comes to the same thing? I only have these things because Thor is not here – because there is no one else. I am the last resort for the realm only because my mother had no other choice. Asgard has no idea its hated second prince is a Jotunn or I would not have my head either.”

“Your jealousy runs even deeper than I thought,” she hissed at him. “It truly clouds everything.” She paused, eyes narrowing. “But not your ability to direct a conversation how you like. Did you do this to Thor, pray tell? Put the seed of going to Jotunheim in his mind and watch it bear fruit like you knew it would? How long did you plot that manipulation, Loki, since the coronation was announced?”

“I never wanted him exiled,” Loki repeated, but Sif shook her head, fingers going again to the hilt of her glaive.

“And I am supposed to believe someone who has lied to me so egregiously, lied to all of Asgard that he is sworn to protect?” The thought of it made her chest constrict uncomfortably, and Sif forced herself not to swallow but to will the block in her throat away.

“How do you think they would react, Sif, truly? How would you have reacted? Oh, I know I needn’t pretend anymore,” and there was a nastiness to Loki’s voice that only made the stone blocking her breath grow again as he watched her closely when she paused before him. “Disgust? Is that it? Would you have wed and bed me if you had known the truth?”

Sif shook her head, trying to will his words away. “We had hoped—I had hoped to see that stranger I met in Gladheim that first day gone for good,” Sif ground out through clenched teeth. “Your mother had lost a son and the Allfather had fallen into slumber – could you blame her for wanting her last son to stay and not become a tyrant?”

Loki laughed hollowly. “I should have known. So you only do your duty to my mother – though I suppose she never was that at all—“

“Don’t speak ill of the woman who wiped your bloody noses when I hit you,” Sif said hotly. Frigga had always been kind to her too, and she would brook no criticism of the old queen from him now. “Loki, I did not come to our marriage without any affection for you, surely you know this. Though I have none at all for liars, for traitors…”

“And did you not think it was your actions that drove me to it? That the constant denigration and the mistrust and the favor you all heaped on Thor, all these years…”

“You can’t think to put the blame on us, on me! We had no idea what you are, it has no bearing on what any of us thought or felt!”

“You are a poor liar, Sif.”

“Do not call me that, Silvertongue! You think that because you lie half the time and equivocate the rest, that everyone else must be just like you! But never, never question my integrity!” She found she’d advanced again, so they were nearly toe to toe. “Not when your own is in tatters. What else
have you lied about, Loki? What else?” When he only glared at her, she gripped her glaive and raised its tip slightly. “Tell me!”

That seemed to startle him, and Loki snapped his gaze up. “You would wish to know?” he whispered, and there was a terrible emptiness in his voice, though his mouth was curled up in a dark and twisted smile. “The list is so long, Sif. Though I suppose lying to Thor when I saw him in Midgard is near the top of it—“

Sif’s brow furrowed. Loki had not been away from Asgard since their wedding, at least not that she knew of. “When have you been to see your brother?”

“Shortly before the wedding. Though I did not know that was in my future then; my mother is crafty in her own ways, I suppose. I told him that which would keep him out of Asgard.”

“Tell me now, Loki, or I so swear—“

“What do you swear, Sif? To strike me down, and break every oath you’ve made since becoming a warrior of the realm?” He paused, and then he smirked at her and it was that same awful mocking smirk he had given her from the high seat that day. “I told Thor that father was dead, and that the truce with Jotunheim was conditional upon his remaining in exile on Midgard.”

“What?”

“I told him Mother did not want him to come home for that reason.”

“Why?”

“I finally have it all in my hands!” Loki shouted back, and suddenly Sif thought she’d gotten to the heart of it, under the final layer of lies. “Everything I had ever been fooled into thinking I might attain! Oh, the illusions faded fast enough, but I had once believed that I could be king on my own merits. The foolishness of youth, you realize. Do you think I would try to make it easy to undo the Allfather’s magic, to willingly give up what I had thought I would never have? Don’t be a fool yourself, Sif, you are beyond it.”

“I did not think you would be so needlessly cruel,” Sif whispered, anger making her voice low and shaky. “To twist the knife in your brother’s own heart!” She glared at him. “Did you lie about being unable to reverse the spell the Allfather laid on Mjolnir?”

Loki clenched his jaw. “No,” he said at last. “No, that is a kind of magic far beyond even my own, not taught by any sage or writ in any spellbook. No lying or equivocation there, Sif.” He sighed, and the sound of it made her anger rise again. “Can we move on, now?”

“Do you think me easily placated?” Before she could think about it, she reached out and swung her fist, and either he had been truly surprised by it or he had wanted it, for he made no effort to move out of the way. Her knuckles connected solidly with his nose, snapping his head back. Loki reeled back, catching himself just before he fell. He put his fingers to his nose, and they came away red. Sif glowered at him, though her eyes held more than contempt. Anger, mistrust… and hurt. He had hurt her. She was War, and she did not let such things slide.

“Know this, Loki,” she said, in a voice as icy as the mists of Niflheim. “I will not break our marriage; I love Asgard and I love your mother, and both better than you ever will. But I will not give you so much as a thread of my respect or my friendship, nor will I welcome you to my bed, until I think you are worthy of any of it again. Gods above know when or if that will ever come to be.” She paused as she turned to leave. “Perhaps you should ask them for aid. You will need it, for you have mine no
longer.” And then, barely above a whisper: “I should never have trusted you again.”

With that she stormed out of the Observatory, calling angrily for her horse. Loki watched her go, mingled rage and regret in his mind, and for the first time in centuries wondered if he had made a mistake that no amount of trickery or cunning could ever fix.
Inertia

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter I had already written up, so from now on updates will be slower. But I'm still going to try and get things out to you guys as fast as possible - the next chapter's already partially written and I've got bullets for the next couple. Thank you all so much for continuing to read, it always makes me really glad to know people enjoy this!

*inertia*; resistance of any physical object to a change in its state of motion or rest, or the tendency of an object to resist any change in its motion.

The van wasn’t roomy enough for two women and a tall man to fit in comfortably, so two women and an Asgardian made for a tight fit in the back with the equipment that they’d been working on reassembling. Either their SHIELD tails had gotten sloppy or SHIELD no longer cared, because yesterday Jane had gotten fed up with sneaking around and stomped across the concrete between the dealership doors and her van with an armful of computer, and none of the goons had done anything. Darcy liked to think that it was just because they were afraid of Jane and her massive boyfriend. Partly because the other option was that they were just waiting to see what she was going to do, and Darcy didn’t like that at all. Jane had become her friend over the course of the months they’d been out here in Alien Abduction, New Mexico, and Darcy hated to see her friend get burned.

But looking at Jane hoist herself through the sunroof with one of the particle detectors she’d just finished, Darcy grinned. Things were getting back to normal. Well, almost, she amended. Thor’s abs had appeared in the mirror too. She might not want to see Jane get burned, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t look at His Royal Hotness’ hot body.

There wasn’t exactly a lot of space in the sunroof but Thor managed to wiggle his broad shoulders through the opening. Out here in the desert, near the original Bifrost site, the only light came from the instrumentation in the van and the stars above. It was a new moon tonight, so they shone even brighter than usual. He twisted, looked to the east; Jane said it was likely that Asgard was in that quadrant of the sky. He wondered which of the tiny twinkling dots represented his home.

“One minute to the event,” Jane said, and ducked back down into the cabin. “Make sure that particle detector’s locked in place and pass the cables down to me please, Thor.” He did as asked and the device lit up when she plugged it in.

“Computer recognizes it. Good, I’d been worried that somewhere in all the jury-rigging I had to do it wouldn’t.”

“We did test it,” he pointed out. Jane grunted, focused on what she was doing, then pushed up in front of him again.

“Fifteen seconds,” she said, but he could see the beginnings of something already, a stirring among the stars that wasn’t purely of this realm. Jane went still, lips parted slightly, and when the sky blossomed with color she grinned like a child.

Thor smiled too, but he was troubled. For almost three months there had been next to nothing –
hardly so much as a blip on any of Jane’s equipment, no disturbances in the sky. Jane had been frustrated, and so had he, for it meant that the Bifrost wasn’t being used for whatever reason, and that didn’t mean anything good for his home. He’d wanted to return to where SHIELD maintained their compound around Mjolnir, make a second attempt at retrieving his hammer. If he could do that perhaps he would be allowed to return home and see what had happened, even if his mother had expressly forbidden it; surely she could not fault him for wanting to return in an hour of need. As cunning as Loki was, Thor worried that the task of being king was something that even the brightest man in Asgard could not completely handle. It made him feel guilty, that he had so little faith in his brother; but if Bifrost travel had resumed and his brother was still in control of the throne, perhaps it meant things were all right.

Beyond that, though, seeing the dancing lights the Bifrost made as it passed Midgard on its way to wherever it was going made Thor miss home. He might never be able to go back to the Realm Eternal, but all around him were reminders of what he had left behind.

They stayed until the multicolored glow disappeared, recording data. Jane seemed pleased by her results, making notations in her notebook, until at last she instructed him to take the detector down and get back inside so they could return to the dealership. Darcy muttered her thanks as she started up the engine and got the van to lumber in a circle until they were pointed back at Puente Antiguo.

Jane’s side of the bed was undisturbed the next morning, so Thor made his way to the dealership and found her hunched over her laptop, poking away at the keys with a half-full mug of cold coffee by her hand. “Did you sleep?” he asked.

She jolted, peeling her eyes away from where numbers scrolled through boxes and graph lines shifted. “Huh?”

“She didn’t,” Darcy supplied helpfully from where she was curled up under a bright blanket on the couch.

“I’m fine,” Jane insisted, but let Thor pull her away from her computer and toward the door. “I found something interesting, actually.”

“What’s that?”

“The readings we took last night matched an event not long before the one that dumped you here. Look at—“ She started back toward the computer but he hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her back.

“It can wait,” he said gently. She almost protested – Thor could see it on her face – but then she relaxed against him and smiled a little ruefully, waving her hand.

“Fine, fine. Izzy’s, then I’ll tell you. Deal?”

“Deal.”

After breakfast she brought the laptop over to the couch and sat next to him, her fingers flying over the keys. “Look,” she said. “These are the readings from last night. And these are from an event not long before the one that brought you here.”

“What does that mean?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. I think maybe it means that this event and the previous one linked the same two places.”
If it had been an activation of the Bifrost right before his banishment, Thor thought… it could have been any number of dignitaries from Alfheim or one of the other allied realms, but it could also have been…

“I wish there were some way to find origin and destination points,” Jane was muttering. “I’ve tried every permutation of the data I can think of, but I can’t get any correlation between a point in space and the energy readings…”

“Tell me more about the twin to this,” he asked.

“Let’s see… we recorded three significant events that night, the last of which was the one that brought you here. The one right before that recorded the exact opposite readings as the first. It’s the first one that matches the event from last night.”

Three trips, the third being the one that brought him here. He knew what it was. “If it matches that one, it must be between Asgardians traveling to Jotunheim.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “You don’t think someone’s going there? Isn’t going there what got you banished in the first place – it’s forbidden, right?”

“As far as I know that has not changed, but it’s the only explanation I have. Though why, I cannot say. Perhaps business needs to be concluded with Laufey, although my brother made it seem as though that was done.” That troubled feeling rose up again. Loki would not have misled him about something like Jotunheim, not when it was such an important matter. The court had their misgivings about his brother, and Thor had borne the brunt of Loki’s talent at spinning disparate threads into a liar’s cloth a few times, but Loki knew the importance of this matter, of their father’s death and the reinstating of the truce. “Some small bit of diplomacy, no doubt,” he said. “I will admit I never had the same talent for it that Loki does. Perhaps it is better that he is king than I.”

Jane reached over and took his hand. Hers were so tiny – sometimes Thor forgot she was mortal, so grand were her dreams and so formidable was her mind. Then again, he was mortal now, too, and for the foreseeable future. Perhaps it was time for his dreams to change a little.

“Even if you can’t be king,” she said. “I’m still going to get you home. I mean it.”

Thor covered her hands with his. “I thank you,” he said sincerely. “You have given me much these months, but more than that, you always give me hope, and that is one of the greatest gifts of all. Even if I cannot return home, knowing will be a comfort.”

“We’ve come a long way,” Jane said, gesturing at the wall of photos, charts, and notes. The picture of Yggdrasil was almost complete, its branches fanning out across the wall. Darcy had photoshopped images of planets to what Thor had described of the nine realms and pinned them up accordingly. Earth in the middle, below an altered picture of a place Darcy had called Ringworld, only with the middle filled in and a fairytale castle in its place. His gaze lingered on that image, and on one lower down that represented Jotunheim. He saw Jane studying it too.

“What did your father mean by ‘worthy’, Thor?” she asked suddenly.

“I am not sure,” he replied slowly. It was a question he had asked himself often, as Jane slumbered beside him, and not one he was any closer to an answer for. He and Erik Selvig had talked about it often, late at night, before the man had returned to Culver and his teaching. The words – Erik’s words, and the echoes of his father’s voice ensorcelling his hammer. “It is some of the old magic and very few know it. But it is powerful, and deeply rooted. My father had a very specific idea in mind when he laid the charm on Mjolnir.”
“Hell of a way to teach a lesson,” Jane muttered, fussing with some of the glossy photos.

“Hela’s punishments are far less charitable.”

“No, I mean—“ she turned to look and caught Thor grinning at her. “Real funny,” she said with a smile of her own.

Darcy, watching them over the top of her glasses, smirked. They had it so bad for each other; if it had been anyone else she’d have been drawing parallels to *Twilight* by now, but somehow it was actually sweet with them. She didn’t think Jane knew just how important she was to Thor, how her boundless enthusiasm, drive, and personal investment in this crusade to find Asgard kept the guy from losing it. Still, when she went to find him later, maybe it was unsurprising he was up on the roof stargazing.


Thor took it from her when she sat. “An individually frosted cake!” he exclaimed. “Ingenius! I know at least one person on Asgard who is feeling jealous and not sure why.”

Darcy stared as he took off the paper and crammed the whole thing into his mouth. “Are you even going to *taste* that?” she asked skeptically. “Or did it not even touch your tongue?”

Thor made a series of noises she interpreted as ‘Yes I can taste it’ and she sighed.

“I thought princes would have better table manners.”

Thor swallowed and tossed the paper into the fire bowl. “I see no table.”

“You know what I mean.” Darcy folded her legs lotus style. “You think you’ll ever get Myuh-mew back?”

Thor was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I hope I do, if only so I know I am… better than I was.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but you *were* kind of a jerk when you first landed,” Darcy told him. “But you *have* changed. You’re definitely better for it, and so is Jane. She’s happier than she was before you arrived, and not just because she finally has someone to talk about her crazy physics-y science-y things with. And despite all appearances, she’s actually been sleeping more regular hours, which I think reduces the perception that she’s a creepy robot girl.”

They both laughed, but it was Thor who quieted first. “I still don’t know who I am now, not really,” he said quietly. “When one spends centuries thinking they know their place, where they belong in the world, what they are meant to do… when they are forced to change, it does not come easily.” It was difficult for him to say these things. He had always been more open with his thoughts, but expressing them… well, that was another matter. “I am used to things being much easier for me.”

“Really, Muscles? Three months with Jane and you still expect things to be easy?” Darcy sighed and cupped her hands around her own cupcake though, licking at the frosting. “Finding out who you are isn’t supposed to be easy though, I think. Lots of people a lot older than I am don’t know. It’s a process.”

Great, Darcy thought. Now she was quoting Kanye West and sounding like a self-help book all at once. What a disaster.

“But I must, if I am to be worthy again.”
“Maybe your dad just wanted to show you that things aren’t always so certain. I mean, I came out here thinking it’d be an easy six credits, cap off my degree, indulge my whimsy… and it’s turned into all this.”

Thor smiled a little. “Perhaps.”

Darcy reached over and patted his arm. “I do know that Jane’s nuts about you though. Completely. So that much is certain.”

Thankfully, that brought the happy Thor grin back again. “She is unlike anyone else I have met here on Midgard.”

“Jane isn’t like other people. But neither are you, so it works out. Just… take care of her, okay?”

“You have my word.” He took her hand and kissed it with a grin.

“Oh my god, that will never get old,” Darcy sighed.

*  

Coulson slid open the door to the command module of the Mjolnir complex. He had been roused in the middle of the night by a call from the agent in charge, had been flown out to New Mexico (again) in one of Stark’s new jets, and had spent the better part of the day driving to this place in the middle of the desert (again). The AIC looked understandably nervous. Good; he kind of liked being respected, when HQ was full of egos.

“You said the readings spiked again?” he asked.

“Yes, right before we called you, sir.” The AIC went to one of the monitors. “At 1:13 AM we registered an atmospheric disturbance of the type that Dr. Foster was tracking—“

“Is tracking.”

“…yes, sir. At approximately 1:15 AM the event peaked and the object emitted the same kind of particles as it did during the events all through the week. A second event registered at 4:03 AM, reverse polarity.”

“Out and back,” Coulson murmured. “Anything interesting that merits me being called out of a very sound sleep?”

“We compared the readings to Dr. Foster’s notes on the event that brought her new friend to what we’ve called the landing site. They matched exactly to the two events prior.”

“So whatever’s doing this took a return trip.”

“Looks like it, sir.” The AIC flipped to an infrared video of the object; they were all calling it Mjolnir by now, though the terminology was different in the weekly reports the AIC filed. The colors changed as the time lapsed. “You can see it responds to the events. Nothing like the recordings from when your buddy in town showed up, but a definite response. I’d go so far as to say they’re all three linked.”

Coulson replayed the video, then sighed. He was going to have to stay here a while. Great.

“Sir?”

“Hm?”
“Does the director know what’s going on out here? What we think is really going on, I mean?”

“We try not to think about it too hard.” Coulson straightened and pulled out his keys. “I’m going to go pay our friend a visit.”

*

Darcy spotted the black Acura first. “Uh-oh, the men in black are coming,” she said. Jane’s eyes snapped to the car driving up the main street and narrowed dangerously.

“I’m tired of these people,” she growled. Darcy prepared to go into damage control mode; her taser was already loaded in her bag anyway, but it was Jane they needed to watch for. She was deceptively small, but she was scrappy; Jane would protect her own, tooth and nail.

“Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes, Jane,” she said. Jane shot her a look as she pushed open the door and stormed out onto the concrete as the Acura pulled up.

“What do you want?” she demanded as Coulson got out of the car, squinting in the spring morning light.

“Just to talk,” he replied, holding up his hands in the universal sign for please don’t let the poli-sci student tase me.

“We have nothing to say to you or SHIELD,” Jane snapped.

“Actually, I’m here mostly to talk to the guy who thinks he’s a Norse god.”

“More like an alien,” Darcy corrected mostly under her breath. Coulson shrugged.

“Is he around?”

“No,” Jane said sharply. “Now please leave, before I call the police.”

“They wouldn’t be able to do much, I’m afraid,” Coulson said. “I’m outside their jurisdiction.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Darcy crossed her arms, hoping she looked and sounded more confident than she felt. Jane might be utterly fearless, but Darcy tended to be more cautious. More calculating. More… well, she was kind of a little intimidated by the SHIELD guys even when they came alone and not visibly armed. But still, she had to present a united front with Jane. Stand together or fall individually and all that. “Thor might be your business, but there’s no way you are above the law, Agent C.”

“At my level, Miss Lewis, we are afforded certain easements to speed the tasks we are assigned.”

“Like violations of Constitutional rights?” Jane asked acidly. Coulson looked pained for a minute.

“Dr. Foster, I’m truly sorry for the way your case has been handled, but the data you collected is of great – maybe vital – importance to several SHIELD ventures and has been very useful over the past week.”

“The—you’ve been monitoring the events too.”

“That’s right. And that’s why we need to talk to Thor.”

“You just want to cart him off to some lab and—“
“There’s where you’re wrong. We want to talk to him about his hammer.” A ghost of a smile had appeared on Coulson’s face. “And, maybe, about a proposition we think he’ll find interesting. And then, depending on how that goes, we’ll want to talk to you.”

*

Thor came back around midafternoon, showered and smelling faintly of the desert. Jane looked up as he came into the lab; Darcy put down the Fangoria she’d been reading, and Coulson ended the conversation he’d been having on his cell. As soon as Thor saw him, he paused, going over to Jane.

“I remember you,” he said.

“Agent Phil Coulson.” He held out a hand. Thor stared at it, then took it and gave it a firm shake. “I’m here representing the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. SHIELD. We need to speak to you about your hammer.”

“Mjolnir?” Thor’s shift in mood was almost visible. “What of it?”

Coulson glanced at Darcy pointedly. “I was told only Dr. Foster was authorized for this.”

“What about Darcy? She is a boon companion of mine. I would have her hear anything you tell myself and Jane.”

“Miss Lewis was not authorized—“

“Hey, you heard him,” Darcy said, drawing herself up to her full Doc Martens-enhanced height. “Boon companions.”

Coulson gave her a long look, then nodded. “Fine. You can sit with the adults.”

Darcy’s voice was as prim as she could make it while pulling over a squeaky roller chair. She sat herself with exaggerated care. “Thank you.” The others sat too, Coulson setting his briefcase down beside his chair.

“We know neither you nor… Mjolnir,” he pronounced the word carefully, “Are from Earth. The hammer is made from no known metal, and while what we can tell of your physiology indicates it’s very similar to ours, your hospital records indicate significant differences in several areas. We’d like to invite you in to our complex in Albuquerque to—“

“No.”

They all looked up at Thor. That single syllable had been given weight, spoken in the voice not of a normal man but that of a king. It was easy to forget that was what he had been raised to, Jane thought. Most of the time he didn’t act like what she (or anyone) imagined alien royalty to be like.

Thor’s eyes were a hard blue, the color of shadows on a glacier. “Any questions you have for me may be asked here. Whether we go to this other place depends entirely upon the decision of all of us.”

There seemed to be a contest of wills going on, but even when Coulson shifted and pulled a dog-eared notepad out of his pocket there was the sense it was less a capitulation and more like a temporary cease-fire.

“Where are you from, really?” he asked. In her head, Darcy groaned.
They were going to be here a while.

*  

When Thor had finished, Coulson sat back. Expressions of complete bafflement sat uneasily on him; it was not something he usually felt. He’d been prepared for weird - this was the guy who’d inspired a myth, after all – but the things Thor had described, the place he’d talked about – they were completely out of Coulson’s frame of reference. By the looks the two women had been throwing Thor throughout the conversation it was clear that some of this was new even to them.

“I’m going to need to speak to my superior about this,” he said. “It’s a lot to process.”

Thor nodded. “I understand. Our realms have had no contact for so long that our reality has fallen into your myth.”

“Perhaps we can change that.” Coulson slipped the notepad away into an inside pocket. “If you want to help us.”

Thor pursed his lips in thought for a long moment, then nodded slowly. “It would be an honor.”

“We’ll be glad to have you on board.” Coulson actually did smile at that, though it was tight-lipped. “Dr. Foster, we’ll need your help as well.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “I’ll need my equipment.”

Coulson only paused a moment before replying, a bit dryly. “Certainly. We’ll have it returned here, or taken anywhere you—“

“Here is fine. And if anything’s been broken or stolen or messed with…”

“We don’t operate like that. I know your confidence in us is low, Doctor, but SHIELD has a vested interest in you continuing your research – an interest which I think may only increase now that we know what we know.”

Jane wasn’t about to simply forgive and forget – she didn’t hold a grudge, but her trust, once broken, was difficult to regain. Still, she nodded coolly. “That’s good to hear.”

“If you need anything else after that, SHIELD will be more than happy to provide you with whatever funding or equipment becomes necessary. We’d like you to focus on finding an origin point for the events you track, if possible.” He glanced at the wall where the nebulous branches of Yggdrasil spiraled out from its central trunk. “It seems you might be closer than you think.”

Jane couldn’t help but look a little proud, even though her expression was still mostly cool. “Not really.”

“If I can reclaim Mjolnir, then perhaps the way home will be reopened to me,” Thor said.

“Then you’d better get to work on that.” He stood, buttoning his suit jacket. “I’ll speak to the director. Your equipment will be returned by tonight, and we’ll provide any assistance you need with setup.”

“Thank you, but I think the three of us will be able to handle it.” Jane went to the door to hold it open for him pointedly.

“I’ll be in town for a few days,” Coulson said as he took the hint and walked back toward his car,
Thor and Darcy coming with him. “Let me know if something goes wrong with the return of your equipment, Dr. Foster. You’re now a matter of national security, you and your friend here. Congratulations.” He nodded at Thor. “Have a nice day.”

*

As they watched him drive away, Jane felt elation bubbling up in her, a sense of renewed purpose. She sent Darcy off to go make sure that everything was ready for when they brought her equipment back and was about to go email Erik and tell him the news when she realized Thor was still standing outside, watching the Acura as it left town headed toward the crater site. Setting her armful of journals aside, she went back out into the afternoon sun. Clouds were rolling in over the mountains in the distance, high up and fluffy-white. Everything seemed brighter, but Thor was strangely dim to her, as though a shadow had fallen over him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Her head barely came up to his shoulders so for a long time she had had to stand back a bit and crane her neck to look up at his face, but in this (and other things) they’d learned to meet halfway.

Thor put his hand on top of hers; though he smiled, there was a look in his blue eyes that reminded her of the big horizons here in New Mexico, going on and on forever without end. “You and Darcy, you have your purposes now. I only have one, and I don’t know how to accomplish it. If my father wished for me to realize that it was my foolhardiness that made him banish me, I have realized it. I don’t understand who he wanted me to be.”

“Then we’ll figure it out together.” Jane curled her fingers around his. “Whatever your father meant, we’ll find out. But if he wanted you to be a good person…” She reached up, and put her hand on his chest, over his heart. “…I don’t know what else he could be expecting. You already are.”

She had to stand up on her tiptoes to kiss him, but Thor helped by lifting her up a little bit. Before, Jane hadn’t liked her men to have beards, but now she liked the scratchiness on her face and on her palm when she cupped his cheek after.

“Who you are isn’t determined by anyone but you,” Jane said. “And I love who you are, Thor.”

The words had tumbled out without her thinking about them, but Jane had spent long enough chasing her questions through the universe to know when she had the right solution; it felt the same as when she solved a set of equations and the answer made sense and explained it all. She smiled up at Thor, and was glad to see he was smiling back at her. Jane worried, sometimes; she was a human, and Thor was—whatever he was—and if he got his hammer back he’d go back to being all of that, and she wondered where that would leave her in his life. But when it was just the two of them, like this or in bed, it was easy to put those worries aside.

*Go for broke,* she thought. “I love you.”

Much to her pleasure, she was folded in a tight embrace, and could feel the rumble of Thor’s voice through her cheek. “And I love you, Jane Foster.”

They finally pulled apart when Darcy poked her head out and asked if she was going to get any help in here or if they were just going to stand out there looking like a romance novel cover all night.

* Coulson watched as the vans rolled out of the complex back toward town, Dr. Foster’s equipment and research inside. They’d be there shortly – good, because they were losing light, and driving back
out here at night was surprisingly dangerous. He still wasn’t sure how Jane had managed it in that van of hers, though he imagined it had something to do with being much more familiar with the area than they were.

“Connection established, sir.”

He turned away from the glass doors and went into the soundproofed secure comm module. It was nicknamed ‘the sarcophagus’ for its almost claustrophobic feel, but Coulson didn’t mind. He’d been in worse situations.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Coulson.”

He directed his attention to the man in the video feed before him. “Director Fury. We’ve got his cooperation.”

“Good to know. He hasn’t reclaimed that thing in the crater yet, has he?”

“No. Apparently he’s not yet worthy, whatever that’s supposed to mean. How are things at HQ?”

“Still working on getting Rogers back in the world; still keeping an eye on Dr. Banner.” Fury shrugged. “Things are quiet.”

“What about that other thing we’ve been keeping an eye on?”

“No change. Not yet.”

“That’s good, I guess. Better than having an incident when we’re not ready.” They shared a look, one they both knew well. “I shouldn’t be here too long,” Coulson continued. “I anticipate returning to New York in three or four days. There isn’t much we can do until Thor gets his weapon back.”

“Yeah, well, let’s just hope he has enough time to do so.”

“Let’s,” Coulson said, but Fury had already terminated the feed. He switched off the monitor and shut things off on his end, leaving the sarcophagus and heading toward the sleeping quarters in the complex. Back at HQ it was normal to be awoken at all hours, but here in New Mexico things were calmer. He might even get a full night of sleep.
Hooke's Law

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Special thanks to my lovely betas for putting up with my whining about this one as it ballooned into a monster.

*Hooke's Law:* an approximation that states that the extension of a spring is in direct proportion with the load applied to it.

The guard knelt, holding the folded piece of parchment in his hands. “A message from Heimdall,” he said, head bowed.

Frigga took the sealed message and took the messenger’s hands in hers. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “Go, and take whatever refreshment you require from the kitchens. Heimdall excuses your absence, I’m sure.”

She could almost hear the gatekeeper chuckling; long had it been since Heimdall had last left his post in the observatory, but Frigga had been so entwined in the realm for so long that it mattered little. It was as much a part of her as her blood, and she felt its own slow beat strong behind her heart. She might have handed the title over to someone else, but one wedded the realm for life.

Missive in hand, Frigga let her feet lead her up on the path from her own chambers and her personal hall of Fensalir with its water gardens, up to the high place where her husband yet slept. She had hoped the turmoil in the palace as of late might wake him, but they had both known how bad it would be, with how long it had been delayed. Three months and more, and still when she laid her hand on his she could feel the disturbances not yet calmed. A single season was barely a blink in the eye of an immortal, but Frigga missed Odin, his strength and steadfastness in her life. It worried her to see him this way, though she knew the magic of the Odinsleep sustained him. His family needed him. She needed him.

Huginn and Muninn greeted her with twin squawks when she walked in, and Frigga bowed her head to each briefly before pulling a crust of bread out and breaking it, setting the two halves before the ravens. They did not need the food, strictly speaking, but she liked to do it to make sure they were comfortable here. While they still left occasionally on their realm-spanning flights, the ravens were here more often than not, their soft rustling a welcome counterpoint to the silence.

It was that she set about combating. Breaking the seal on the message, she smoothed the creases with a hand and took Odin’s in her other.

“Heimdall has sent word of Thor,” she told him quietly. “As I have asked him to do. I know you exiled him to the mortal realm for a reason, love, but you must forgive a mother for wanting to know her child is all right. When so much else is in flux, it makes me happy to hear news of one of my sons.”

Looking down at the script – penned by some loyal retainer of Heimdall’s, no doubt, someone who did not balk at defying the Allfather’s wishes (and, she suspected, the wishes of the king) in even this smallest of ways – she told him of Thor’s efforts in helping the people of the town he had come to call his home while on Midgard. She told him of his friendship with the old scientist Erik Selvig, the
girl with the strange name of Darcy who, as the missive read, was as a little sister to Thor. She paused, a little smile on her mouth as she read of the love her son had for the mortal Jane. The missive spoke much of them, and from what was said here and before it seemed to Frigga that this mortal was different – driven and determined and headstrong as her son was, but with a compassionate heart that loved deeply and well.

It pained her, more than a little. Thor would surely one day regain his powers and his immortality, and while there were means of giving a mortal eternal life, they were rarely granted. Even then, knowing what little she did of Jane, Frigga wondered if the mortal woman would wish that for herself. The thought of her son watching his love grow old and die was one she as a mother could not bear. But those paths were yet untraveled.

She spoke of all this to Odin, knowing he could hear her voice even if he could not respond. She imagined sometimes that the little swirling points of light in the field that surrounded him were somehow tied to his will, that when they spun and brushed over her skin it was his way of imitating his own gruff comfort. Odin had always left this side of things to her; articulating what was in his heart had never been easy for him, not from the moment she met him to the present. He would try, in his own ways, to tell her how much he cared for her, to tell his sons how proud he was of the men they had become, but sometimes – most of the time – the messages were lost in translation. Certainly that was at the root of the problems now facing his family.

Frigga finished reading the letter and telling her husband her thoughts on it, and sighed, resting her head in her hand as she laced their fingers together. His were gnarled like the roots of a great oak tree, but they were familiar and comforting. “Just as I thought things between them were getting better,” she murmured, “Something else happens. I wonder if they are perhaps doomed to forever dance around each other, rather than meet in the middle as I had hoped. This is not the sort of thing I can solve with a well-placed word or the right kind of placation, husband. This is something they must work out for themselves. But trust is too easy to break and far more difficult to repair.”

Frigga passed her hand over her face, then laid her head on the pillow beside her husband’s. “I mean to speak to them both about it, and especially Loki,” she said. “Betrayed by us or not, he has more than his own hurts to think of.”

* * *

More and more, Loki found himself contemplating the concept of hell. Unlike his fellows, Loki had made a study of Midgard due to his own curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Mortals on the whole meant little to him (though he kept abreast of the doings of some for his own reasons), but their little, frantic lives were astonishingly creative ones when it came to the realm of ideas. When Asgard had withdrawn its influence from Midgard, humans had come up with a multitude of ways to articulate their grasp on the concept of good and evil, and what happened to those who went to the seat of the latter. Hela had always found it amusing that they dubbed it ‘hell’ and that it was a place of eternal torment at the hands of demons, but Loki had been intrigued that some seemed to think that, like heaven, hell was what one made it to be.

Presently he was wondering if that fascination was due to the fact he was sitting exactly three and a half inches from his wife, but if he were to judge by her body language alone (tense, turned away from him, knuckles white as they gripped her knife and fork) he would think she wanted him three and a half realms away from her, which probably wasn’t far from the truth. It was also the truth that being so close, close enough so that if he lifted his hand but a little he could brush her wrist with his fingertips, and being unable to touch her or catch her eye without feeling burned, was a very special
kind of hell.

It was made worse by the fact that he remembered a night, when the trip to Jotunheim had been almost arranged, where he had lain on his side looking at Sif as he kissed her wrist and traced the blue veins under the skin with the tip of his tongue. The burning then had been very different, and she had looked at him with the firelight in her eyes, and for that night he had not felt cold at the knowledge of what would invariably happen when they went to take care of this piece of business. He had not felt cold at all, nor had he felt heavy with the weight of his thoughts. Not like he did now.

In the end, he had done it without having to give up Casket or territory or too much face, really. Laufey had a better bargaining tool now – he knew Loki’s secret, something he could disseminate at will. Other realms might not have much regard for Jotunheim, but even a rumor could hurt, and if it were to be even suspected that the king of Asgard was a Jotunn himself things would get much more dangerous. Killing Laufey then and there had been out of the question, with Sif there and the two of them surrounded. He would have to do something about it eventually, but it would take careful consideration.

But Sif had been right; going into battle preoccupied was a bad idea, advice which did not apply only to the kind of fight she had been talking about. Loki knew himself well enough to know that he was not top form at all, and once more his plans ground to a halt. But this time it was not the meddling of anyone else that had stopped him. No, this time his blocks were of his own devising.

His wife had gone to join a knot of warriors so he felt safe in watching her when her back was turned, though he did not let his gaze linger too long and eventually rose to circulate among the guests. It was, Loki reflected, a mark of how well people had learned to play this game that he knew they marked the dissonance between their rulers, and yet smiled and pretended that nothing was wrong.

Of course, his marital problems with Sif were hardly the only thing going on in the realms to be a source of concern. He was stopped by one of his military advisers on a circuit round the table.

“My king,” the man said, bowing his head and fisting his hand over his heart. Edwik was one Loki had appointed because he was particularly loyal, one of his rare supporters among the older warriors. “A new report from Vanaheim arrived just before the feast began. It awaits your pleasure.”

“Oh, of course,” Loki replied, putting a hand on the minister’s shoulder. “I shall read it straightaway in the morning.”

Edwik paused. “This might be one of the ones you want to read tonight, my lord,” he said slowly. “The news gave me chills when one of the patrols brought it back.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki noticed Sif watching him, her eyes narrowed slightly. Sif knew Edwik – they were hardly friends, but she had not opposed his appointment when Loki had told her of his plans – and knew what the two of them talking and the expression on the old warrior’s face meant. She would want to know, which meant talking to her, something barely accomplished without trouble as of late. He pretended not to see.

“Tonight, then. I trust your judgment in these matters.” With a last bow of his head Loki moved on, feeling the heat of Sif’s eyes prickling between his shoulder blades.

When the feast drew to a close, one of the attendants rang a gong made of silver as bright as the stars. Though she tucked her arm through his Sif would not meet his eyes as they made their way out of the hall, the signal for the rest of the guests to begin dispersing as well. Luckily, it only lasted until the golden doors to the hall had been shut behind them, and they could step away from each other.
There was a moment of silence as they made their way toward the residential levels of the palace until Sif cleared her throat and spoke, voice cool. “You were speaking with Edwik.”

“He had a report for me. More news from Vanaheim.”

That made her look over. “Another patrol came back?”

“If news that is apparently interesting enough for me to give it my attention tonight. The report is on my desk.”

“Then you should attend to that.” They had reached a juncture in the corridor, and Sif seemed to be looking at him expectantly as they fell into silence again. When he said nothing, she made a noise and turned to walk away.

Loki watched her, the fabric of her dress shimmering steel blue in the low nighttime lighting of the palace. “Sif…”

She looked back at him. “What? You know what I ask of you, and you have not or will not do it.”

“What are you up to then—?”

“This is not some simple dispute you can sit back and wait to cool, Loki.” She turned to face him fully, dark brows drawn together. “This is not another mediation – nor a game, since you seem to think that all around you play them. I am not going to let it go away.”

Loki watched her, turning the problems and the potential solutions over and over in his mind, trying to find the ways they fit together. A thousand things spun through his mind, a thousand words he could say – to anger her, to appease her, to hurt her. There were only two he truly needed, and he knew what they were, and yet they were the only two he could not bring himself to say.

“Is there anything—“

“No, there isn’t.” Sif turned away again, but not before he caught the look in her eyes. Disappointment. She could join the rest of the crowd in being disappointed with him.

“In the morning, then.”

Sif nodded once, the gems in her hair catching the light. “Yes.”

Loki watched her until she disappeared around the bend in the hallway, then sighed and started toward his study – in the opposite direction.

This was his private space, rather than the public receiving room where he would officially hear matters unable to be brought before him in Gladsheim, a suite of rooms where only the most highly ranked or personally invited petitioners could come. Most never saw this level of the palace, so to be so honored was a mark of great investment, and Loki had thus far found nobody who warranted it. He doubted he would. Most of them were tedious.

But here in the suite of rooms that was all his own, he did not have to deal with them. When the doors shut behind him, he was left with only the weight of his thoughts and the weight of the books in the shelves that spiraled up around the room. No stairs nor ladders here; Loki needed only his magic to call any book he wanted to his hand, and so kept some of the more esoteric and dangerous volumes here, where there was a much-reduced chance of anyone finding them.

But it was the second room in the suite he had spent far too much time in as of late. Loki kept long
hours as a matter of course, but the rest he found here was not as therapeutic as when he was in bed with Sif. Given the turmoil between them he could hardly expect it to be, but it was more than that. It had been comforting to wake from a nightmare and find her there and safe, just within arm’s reach. Now that was gone.

There was little comfort to be found anywhere, though, he thought as he sat and broke the seal on the latest report. Sif had not understood him, and when he finished reading the message and sat back, chin in one hand, it seemed that despite his efforts to avoid one war the realm was about to be embroiled in another, one he wasn’t sure he could either avoid or win.

Lighting the braziers and the fireplace with a wave of his hand and a flash of green light, Loki pulled parchment toward him and began to make his plans.

* *

The next morning, he rose from his seat at table and went over to where the Warriors Three were sitting, regaling a crowd of courtiers with some story they’d told a half dozen times before. It didn’t matter to Volstagg (the main one imparting the heavily-embellished story) or Fandral (the one gallantly acting out certain scenes before a gaggle of court ladies), and Hogun simply ate with his head down, but Loki had no patience for them today. They had all of them been civil enough to each other, but the Three had always been truly Thor’s friends, rather than his.

“…and then, with a mighty bellow, I slew the troll—“

Fandral lowered his rapier. “Oh, that was hardly how it was, Volstagg, I was there—“

“As was I,” Loki cut in, feeling brittle from lack of sleep and mental weariness. “And as I recall, it was Sif who slew the troll with the aid of Hogun, while the two of you were occupied with five very tenacious goblins and my concussed brother.”

There was a moment of uneasy silence, then Fandral and Volstagg burst into somewhat forced laughter. “Of course that was the way of it, Your Majesty,” Fandral said with a flourishing bow. “How silly of me to have forgotten! Though Volstagg here seems to want his stories to be as voluminous as his gut—“

“Do not speak insults against my breadth, you rake! I can only speak the truth on a half-full stomach!”

Loki held up a hand and they stopped, looking at him with that half-wary, half-respectful expression they’d always had; even Hogun looked up, turning slightly in his seat so his ear was closer. He had been their prince and their companion on many adventures, it was true, but now he was their king and they knew how he had come by the throne, and they were careful of him. Worse, he had no idea how much Sif had told them. They were still her friends too, after all.

“I have had a most troubling report from the outer settlements of Vanaheim,” he said. “The Vanir scouts have told our garrisons there that some foe sends incursions against them, and our own patrols have confirmed this. You three will lead a team there; fight if you must, but what I require is information. Try not to cause an incident.”

“Of course, my liege, your word is our command and we take it to heart as Fandral takes ladies to his bed—“

“I would hope it is a somewhat more constant fealty than that,” Loki replied icily.

“Yes, as stern and stoic as Hogun, is that not so, old friend?”
“That much I can believe. You will leave in an hour’s time.”

“But the food—“

“Is eating more important than serving the will of your king?”

The three looked between them, and then as one bowed and fisted their hands over their hearts. “We are sworn warriors of Asgard, my king,” Fandral said. “We will do as you ask.”

When he returned, Sif did not look at him nor lean over, but her voice was low when she spoke. “You are sending them to Vanaheim.”

Loki took a breath; he had told her the contents of the report. Clearly that had been a mistake. Now she wanted to go with them, he could see it in her face. “Along with an appropriately-sized detachment, yes, to find out what they can of this foe.”

“Sending the Three to be stealthy?” she snorted.

“Sending them to focus the eyes of these enemies, while the scouts I sent out earlier move in and find out what they can. If the Three return with actual, usable information, so much the better, but I expect them not to.”

“Do you expect so little of those who serve you?”

Loki kept from grinding his teeth by sheer force of will. “I expect little so that I am pleasantly surprised later if they manage to deliver.”

“Wise,” she said acidly. Then it came. “I mean to go with them.”

“And you have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do.” She looked at him then and it burned. “I am a warrior as well as queen. I serve this realm. I will go.”

“It’s below you.”

“I’ll judge that myself.”

“I don’t want you going against an unknown enemy,” he snapped, then paused, waiting to see if anyone had heard. The conversation had not quieted, so Loki continued. “I know we have done it before, but I would rather you stay in reserve for bigger things, for when we know what we’re against.”

She went silent on that, but by the way her shoulders stayed taut and her fingers gripped her goblet of chilled juice too tightly, Loki knew she had added this to his list of sins. It bothered him less than he imagined it ought, but given the gravity of the other things she held against him, it was hardly more than a drop of water in a vast lake.

* *

“Sending us off without letting us finish breakfast,” Volstagg moaned as the Warriors Three saddled their horses. “It must be a matter of urgency.”

“You wouldn’t know it from looking at him,” Fandral replied, buckling his mount’s girth, eyeing it, and then slapping the horse’s barrel. His gelding stamped a hoof and exhaled, and Fandral buckled it the rest of the way. “It’s as though he’s been carved from ice.”
“Irritable ice.”

“Marital disputes will do that, I’m told. It’s why I intend never to marry – that way if I argue with a woman, I can simply never see her again! A wise plan, eh, Hogun?”

They mounted up and walked their horses out into the courtyard where the soldiers that had been assigned to them waited, talking quietly amongst themselves. While Volstagg and Fandral trotted to the head of the group, Hogun reined in and did a head count, brow furrowing. It seemed as though…

He nudged his horse over to a slender soldier with their hood drawn up, despite the warmth of the morning. “My lady,” he said out of the corner of his mouth. “You should not be here.”

“I will not let my husband dictate my actions. I serve Asgard, not him.” Sif’s eyes were bright under her cloak; she had foregone her glaive and her usual, distinctive shield for plainer ones. “I will go and defend my home. Can I trust you, Hogun?”

The way she said it made him pause. Being a team of warriors meant they had to trust each other – if your fellows didn’t have your back in a fight, it was much easier to die – but Sif had spoken with a slight shake in her voice as though her trust was a fragile thing, when she had always been one of the most steadfast of them all. Though she had not given them the details of whatever had kicked off her argument with Loki, Hogun got the idea that a lack of trust was at the heart of it.

“You can trust me, Lady Sif,” he murmured. “Keep your hood up until we are arrived.”

She smiled at him, white teeth and anticipation. “Lead on,” she replied, and fell into line as they rode out toward the Observatory.

*  

Loki was alone in his study when one of his mother’s handmaidens – Lofn, if he remembered correctly, which he always did – came in and curtsied.

“My lady Frigga bids you come join her in Fensalir,” she said.

“Tell her I will come shortly,” he replied, and looked back at the missive he’d been reading. Lofn did not move, and Loki sighed, vanishing the papers on his desk. “Right now?”

“Now.”

He rose, smoothing his hands over his armor, adjusting it until it was just so before stepping out from behind the desk. “Very well. I will go with you.”

There was no way this was going to be a simple conversation between Frigga and her son, not if she’d sent a handmaiden to make a formal request like this. When he and Thor had been young, the prospect of getting called in front of their mother to answer for something had almost been more terrifying than when Odin confronted them. His overt anger they could handle, but Frigga and her quiet anger – and more upsetting, her disappointment – was something that neither he nor Thor had ever been able to take well. But he was an adult and king, now. He could not let himself be so easily cowed.

There were fewer and fewer people the farther up in the palace they went, a fact Loki was glad for; often he would be stopped by this noble or that minister with some question or request or attempt to engage in conversation. He had long perfected the art of polite conversation, but now was not the time. It was unwise to keep his mother waiting when she called, though her patience was greater than that of anyone else he knew. Still, it was a relief when they finally reached the right level, where only
the guards and attendants and special guests roamed the halls.

Lofn held the door open for him and bowed her head as he passed into the heart of Fensalir. Nodding to the other handmaidens who were seated around with some of the younger daughters of the nobility, Loki made his way over to where his mother sat at the edge of one lily-filled pool. It stretched out before her bench into the exposed balcony, joined to the other pools by rivulets that through clever design and no small amount of magic burbled just like a real stream might.

The water gardens of Fensalir had been a gift to Frigga from Odin, to help her through the period of time just after their marriage when she had missed her home in the lands of her father. Loki remembered a visit to the hall of Fjörgynn when he and Thor had barely been out of their first century; the area around had been dotted with connected lakes and little ponds. He and Thor had passed the trip blissfully unaware of the efforts Odin had been making to raise levies for the conflict (war, really, but it had not been named as such with the Great War just behind them) with the Vanir; they had been more concerned with swimming and catching frogs.

The stone pools here were but pale imitations, and yet Loki had always found this place soothing to him. A good thing, too; the look on his mother’s face was a fearsome one indeed, and though he had resolved to be kingly, he could not help but feel a little like a child again. She was not Odin or Thor, to raise storms when she angered. Hers was loosed in more subtle ways indeed.

Loki took her hand and kissed it, as always. “Hello, Mother. Lofn said you sent for me.”

He knew he was in for it when she stood and clapped her hands to get the attention of her handmaids. “Please, go see if Eir needs any assistance with those in her ward. And do not let any injured warriors woo you with their flowery words, you young ones!”

When they were gone, Frigga put her hands on her hips and stared at him for a long moment, then sighed and sat again, picking up her spindle and setting it to spinning stormcloud-gray thread once more.

The silence stretched on, and Loki resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably. Even in this ceremonial armor he did not usually feel so, but that was his mother's power - making powerful men feel very small and vulnerable by virtue of the sheer strength of her will, and her sons had never been any exception (and probably never would be). From boyhood Loki knew it was wiser to wait until his mother had decided to speak and then said her piece, rather than to start trying to explain oneself. Invariably one ended up divulging incriminating evidence without Frigga having to do anything but wait until the culprit was done and mete out punishment.

Perhaps that was why she’d always been the parent he’d felt closest to – like Loki, Frigga operated on a more subtle level than either the Allfather or Thor did. Odin’s generally distant fatherhood aside, Frigga had been the one to listen when he’d brought her problems, the one he’d always called for in the night when he’d had a nightmare. She had defended him when he’d said he’d rather study magic than swordplay, and had helped when he’d gotten stuck on something, for she had her own magic (though it had been outstripped by his developing powers all too quickly). But being closest to her also meant that her expectations of him were generally higher, and her upset felt more keenly. Like right now.

At last, she said coldly, “I would have thought you had learned the value of being honest with your family.”

“Mother,” Loki began, but Frigga stopped him with a raised fingertip.

“I had thought to tell her myself, you know, when I arranged the marriage,” she continued. “But I
did not, not because I thought she would react with disgust or that she would not keep our secret, but because I had hoped that the regard you hold her in would properly motivate you to do the right thing and tell her yourself.”

“She would have hated me for it. She is already in a position she never wanted and struggled enough with that, it would have been cruel to put this upon her as well—“

“As cruel as it was to make her face it when surrounded by enemies?” Frigga’s voice was sharp, and Loki, despite himself, felt deflated and looked away. It was as clear an admission of wrongdoing as she needed.

“It matters little. She hates me for it anyway.”

He looked back at his mother’s face and was surprised to see it softening. “Oh, my son,” she murmured. “Sif doesn’t hate you at all, not one bit.”

A spike of hope, hot and sharp, rose up suddenly. He tried to ignore it, but it would not go away as easily, not like the rest of the things he felt and then tucked away. “Are you certain of it?” Loki asked. His voice was quiet, but full of deep hurt. “The things she said in the Observatory… they had edges as sharp as anything I have said or any blade I have wielded. I have ever been the one to cut with my clever tongue – with my silver tongue – but rarely have I had to receive it.”

“And from her, it was all the worse.”

“Like she twisted the knife again and again,” he agreed, shifting again. It was uncomfortable to be so honest, even with his mother. “Now I cannot look, nor can I touch, and can barely speak to her without feeling as though I am trying to stick my hand down the throat of a dragon.”

“She did not choose that for her crown and her helm without reason.” Frigga smiled, gentle and sad, and took his hand in hers. “But yes, Loki, I am certain she does not hate you. She feels greatly hurt and deeply betrayed, and sadness that you felt you could not trust her… but hate? Loki, Sif would have bid me pass her over for this marriage if she thought she would hate you, even if it meant shirking her duty. Surely you know how she feels, has long since felt toward you by now – you are perceptive and could not have missed it. That is why your actions cut her so deeply.”

Loki’s brow furrowed in thought. “How do you know this?”

“She came to me, a few days after your trip to Jotunheim. She told me what had transpired when you went there, and what was said after in the Observatory.”

He went very still. There had been much that was evil said between them, none of it very flattering at all to him. “Did she?”

“She was very distraught.” Frigga picked up her spindle and set it in her lap, carefully keeping the thread and the unspun wool separate. “I have not seen Sif near to tears since she was but a child and one of you boys had pushed her out of that tall tree onto the stones of the courtyard…” she looked out over the ponds. “But I was glad our conversation was in private. Much like you, I do not think she would have shared half so much nor shown how deeply she felt if there were other eyes to see her.”

“She did not understand, though,” Loki began bitterly. “She saw and heard only what she wanted —“

“No.” Frigga cut him off sharply. “She did not understand why you had kept this from her, why you thought she would not keep your confidences when she had bound herself to you by oath and yes,
by what is in her heart too. Rightly she feels, for she had thought things were beginning to mesh, that the two of you were becoming a team and that the stranger that she had said sat on the throne in place of the son I raised was, perhaps, becoming a bad memory. Sif wants to understand, Loki, she wants to share these things with you, but she cannot if you don’t let her, and will not if you insult her. It must be your choice, and the ones you have made thus far will not be an easy thing for her to forgive.”

“Perhaps it’s better this way. Or maybe I do not want her to forgive me.” He caught his mother’s look and sighed. “But I should know better than to hide my true thoughts and play these games with you, Mother.”

“You should know better than to try to lie to me,” Frigga told him coolly. “Whether or not I carried you within me is not important; we are family, and you will be honest with me, and with the rest of us.”

“Even you could not have misread Thor’s behavior.” Loki’s voice turned hard. “How quickly his mind turned to war and bloodshed, the things we had been taught we were to avoid in the protection of this realm. If he had been named king he would have ruined Asgard and all Father sought to preserve.”

Frigga was quiet a moment, then sighed and bade him sit with her with a wave of her hand. “We knew your brother was not yet ready for the throne when we made the announcement,” she said at last. “But your father had put his own needs aside for too long – his restoration within the magic of the Odinsleep – and it was beginning to show in new and worrisome ways while we waited for Thor to be ready for the kingship. Odin needed to step down and let someone younger and stronger rule, but he insisted on remaining, on trying to impress upon Thor the importance of restraint and sacrifice. Being king is not all glory and battle, as you know well by now…but we were desperate, and Odin insisted on his original plan to reveal you to Laufey in the future. He wanted you to rule Jotunheim, to ensure they could rebuild and prosper again.”

“After centuries spent filling me with tales of the brutality of the Jotunns?”

“It could not be avoided. We tried to shield you at first, but you know the value of appearances.”

Loki could not argue that. So many of his own actions were predicated on doing what people wanted to see so he could be free to do what he wanted elsewhere. “Father never made it seem thus; Thor was always the worthy son. I was not.”

“Your father…” Frigga sighed again. “He is a good man – stern, but he loves the two of you dearly. Betimes he sees only his duties and the burdens he carries, and sharing what is truly in his heart has ever been a problem for him. But we both love you, Loki, and Jotunn or not you are our son as much as Thor is. We raised you from a babe and we have watched with pride as you have become a man.”

Loki was silent a long time, staring out over the garden. There were the secluded benches he’d always found to be good, shady places to read; there the paths of stepping stones crossing the pools of water where he and Thor, and then Sif later on had chased each other. That one there, that was where she had pushed them both into a pool and laughed at their ruined clothes…

It always came back to Sif, to his family. The greatest lie in his life was his life, and yet his mother’s words had the ring of truth to them. But was this what love was to be for him? A burden carried along through all the long years of his life?

“So I am supposed to believe that the favor for Thor was only because of Father’s failure to impart the pride he had in me?” he asked at last. “Why?”
“Why does the light travel across the sky as it does? Why are the stars in their places?” Frigga suddenly looked weary to him, rather than ageless and regal. Like Sif contained, it felt wrong. “Not all things can be explained thoroughly, not by words spoken or written. It is not a satisfying answer, Loki, but it is the only truth I know.” She reached out and cupped his cheek, a sad smile on her face. “I wish there were words to use to make you see and understand just how much we care for you, words that would take away your pain and doubt. But that kind of absolution and certainty can only be found in your own heart.”

“Truth, forgiveness – all slippery enough things to deal with.”

“Not always.” The weariness was gone, thankfully, but her gaze was steady and stern. “Not when it is your wife and your brother who deserve one and can offer the other. I know I cannot tell you what to do, Loki, you are no longer a child, but I can hope my words carry some weight to you. Make things right with Thor and Sif. You may have a long way back to their trust, but you should not leave things as they are. You need both of them, you know, for their talents and their love.” Her hand stroked his cheek again and then fell away. “I would rather see you happy than like you are now. But I cannot lead you to it.”

Sensing most of her ire was out – in his hands now, of course, but aired between them at least – Loki gave his mother a little smile. True smiles from him were a rarity, saved for the special few he held in the highest regard. He had spoken ill of Frigga in the Observatory several days ago, but he had been angry then, nettled by having to play one of his high cards to Laufey. He could not think unkindly of her now. “I will trust in your wisdom in these matters, Mother.”

“As well you should. I have lived much longer and seen much more than you, and though you have a keen and powerful mind, my son, knowledge is no replacement for experience.”

“Ever did you know the difference between being smart and being wise.” He rose, kissing her hand again, and relishing the look of affection in her eyes.

“Ever did you know the most silvery words to say,” she replied fondly. “Now, go. Set things right. I know you have a talent for that, too.”

She was right; the way forward was hazy, and that made him uncomfortable, as used to knowing the path ahead as he was. But to her he said “I will, Mother. I…” Loki’s words faltered, tongue thick in his mouth, mind sluggish. “Thank you,” he finished. If he was to start telling the truth, it was well enough that it be here and now.

* 

Frigga watched him go, the green fabric of his cape billowing out behind him. Loki kept much beneath his guise of impassivity, but she had raised him. She knew when his thoughts were troubled, as they were now.

Raising her eyes to the clouds scudding across the bright skies of Asgard, Frigga drew in a long breath and let it out, and tried to make her worries go with it.

* 

It had grown dark before Loki realized he had not seen Sif all day. Not that this was an uncommon thing lately – Sif kept as far away from him as she could, and while his mother’s words spun round in his mind Loki did not know where to begin (apparently, Odin had imparted his lack of ability at expressing emotions to his adopted son). But it was nearing dinner, and the messenger he sent out to invite her to dine privately with him returned, confusion and a little fear on his face.
But by then, Loki had seen the Bifrost activate, and the specks of riders – more returning than had
gone out with this particular group – galloping along the bridge. He could not see them clearly yet,
but the way some were riding…

“I was unable to find the queen, my lord,” he said, head bowed. “I apologize for my failure.”

“No need,” Loki said, rising from his seat quickly. “I know where she’s gone.”

In the moment it took for him to vanish from the room and reappear in the courtyard, the riders had
come in. The horses were splattered with mud, blood, frothed with sweat. Their metal shoes struck
sparks against the stones of the courtyard as the coursers danced around nervously, but mixed among
them were workhorses, swaybacked old nags, children’s ponies, all of them carrying riders and some
more than one.

Loki pushed through the press of horses and guards – she hadn’t taken her gray courser, of course
she would have known he’d check to see if her horse was still in its stall – and there she was on a
blue roan. Sif’s hood had fallen back and she was shouting orders, people hastening to obey the
words of their queen. There was a terrified-looking child sitting in the saddle before her, clutching
the arm Sif had wrapped around her.

“I told you not to go with them!” he shouted as a knot of guards moved an injured soldier out of the
way. Sif turned her horse to glare at him.

“I told you that you have no right to say what I cannot do,” she shot back. “I’m a warrior, Loki, this
is what I am meant for, what I am sworn to do – to protect the realm and its citizens! Would you
keep me from that, locked up in a tower to satisfy yourself?”

He clenched his jaw angrily. It was easy enough to keep the fear and the relief at seeing her alive and
unhurt off his face, but they were there, roiling his stomach and making him sick. “You know I
would not. But to go in such secrecy – to lie…”

“You would know about feeling as though there are no other options.”

Stung, Loki kept his teeth together and looked around at the soldiers and the others they’d brought
back. “Who are these people, Sif?”

“Villagers – we found them under attack as we rode out toward one of our garrison outposts. They
had no warning, Loki, they are unarmed farmers, craftsmen. And they say this foe moves through the
land, burning villages and killing as they go.” She dismounted and held her arms out for the girl, who
clung tightly to Sif’s neck when she slid off the saddle. After a couple unsuccessful attempts at
peeling her off, Sif just held her there, looking at him defiantly. “They needed protecting, and now
they need a home since theirs has been razed to the ground. What was I supposed to do?”

He looked around, sucking in a breath. She had a point, and a canny mind of her own. By bringing
these villagers here, she had shown that Asgard truly did have a vested interest in all its people, even
the ones not based on the Realm Eternal itself, and that it valued them enough to send its queen to
fight.

“You could have been killed,” he muttered. Sif leveled a look at him.

“It would take much more than this to kill me,” she said airily, though in her eyes he read something
different before she guarded her expression. “I would hope you thought as much yourself.” The look
in her eyes finished her accusation: Though having faith in others is not your strong point, is it, Loki?

He turned and gestured to one of the palace stewards that had come out to see what the fuss was.
“See that these people have accommodations here in the palace until others can be found for them,” he said. “Give them what food and clothing they need from our own stores. If more is needed, I will give you an allowance from the treasury to purchase it. Go. Sif, and… yes, you three,” he said as Hogun, Fandral, and Volstagg rode up and deposited their extra riders onto the ground. “I will expect to hear what you have learned and encountered tomorrow.”

The villagers, hearing his words, bowed their heads low in gratitude. Some passed by and thanked him personally, the children making their manners clumsily and without the polish of Asgardian children, but with just as much heart. Sif set the girl in her arms down on the ground and when the girl would not loosen her grip on her hand, led her in with the rest. Loki watched them go.

So, he thought. *It is to be war, then.* The feeling of standing on a tall cliff was back; all that remained now was the push that sent them over the edge.
Next chapter, and it’s a big one! I hope you all enjoy!

Also I really love all the comments I get from you guys. It’s a lot of fun reading what you get out of my writing and how much you enjoy it, so thank you so much. But even just knowing people read it at all is great.

*gravity*: the force of attraction by which terrestrial bodies tend to fall toward the center of the earth.

Asgard was a realm that knew war.

Its soil had seen little blood be shed upon it; never had the endless falls at its rim run crimson. But in the hearts of its people, war was a drum that beat ever onward, an inescapable rhythm that, once begun, drove them to action and even when silent directed their lives. Most citizens had some training with a weapon, be it sword or bow or spear. Some of those had gone on to join the legions, and fewer still rose to become sworn warriors of the Realm, proving their loyalty and skill through quest and battle. Every child knew the names of the finest, and those who did not hope to be named among them one day were those whose minds had turned to how to arm them.

The whole of the realm and its outposts could not turn to producing the tools of war, of course. But as word of what was transpiring on Vanaheim (a world just beside that of Asgard itself, practically, and thus considered nearly home) spread, more forges in the city turned out swords, more goods were sent to the palace to feed the growing number of recruits in the garrison, and the slow but steady trickle of displaced Vanir villagers that had made for Asgard instead of one of the bigger Vanir cities. Most of those who lived in Asgard’s city might never have known true, bloody war, but all of them knew what to do to prepare others for it, and what they would have to sacrifice.

Sif had come into her element in the weeks since her illicit trip out. Her days began at sunrise and went to well after night had fallen and the Branches provided illumination – training of new recruits, distribution of armor and weapons to soldiers activated already, dissemination of orders. War was her purview, and though they had ministers and officers aplenty, Sif preferred to see to some things herself. It was an exhilarating feeling, being in charge of these things, even if she did not need Heimdall’s sight to see the darkness looming ahead of them.

Of course there was only so much she could do in a day, and though the palace never truly slept she needed to, as much as she wanted to simply burn the candles through to the end. She exhausted herself every day, and though it didn’t any of it easier or less painful, it dulled the ache for a while. Usually she was asleep so quickly that she had no time to think, but there were nights where she lay awake, turning words and looks and half-formed musings over in her mind until she thought she’d go mad.

“My queen?”

Sif snapped her attention back to the present, and the page holding out a sheaf of parchment. She recognized Loki’s tidy scrawl on the top page and tried not to think about it as she read what was
writ there – more attacks on Vanir settlements, rumors of more in other outposts of Asgard. That was
what they had to go on – rumor and hearsay, and the confusing reports from those whose calls were
heard by Heimdall.

“Thank you,” she replied, tucking the parchments away. “I’ll see these attended to presently.”

The page hesitated a moment before clearing her throat. “The king would also like to dine with you
tonight. On the south terrace, tenth level, at the normal dinner hour.”

Sif caught the page’s eye, and the young woman quickly dropped her gaze. “Tell my husband that I
shall consider his offer,” she said. She was not Loki, who could keep his tone level as the wheat
fields of the east quarter even when he was of a rage inside. Sif let her disdain be heard in her voice,
let it be known very well to the page (who had probably been instructed by Loki to make note of
such things) that despite the various overtures he’d made, she had not yet forgiven him for his
deceits.

“What if he wants a more definite answer, my queen?”

“He’ll have it if I’m not there, won’t he?”

The page ducked her head again. “Yes, my queen,” she said obediently, and hurried away. Sif
watched her go. With so many of the men and the boys who had gained their majority joining up
with the soldiers on the eve of a new war, Sif had made sure that the stations in the palace they had
left vacant were filled to her liking, and if some were flustered by her choices, it mattered little to her.
They could not afford to be choosy, however the nobility wanted to believe that they still could. It
was still a game to them, and Sif had had enough of games to last her into her next century.

War, even the beginnings of it, was not a pretty thing. She had gone up against what she realized
was a scouting force of this foe they were up against, a small band to harry these villages and take
what resources they could while the main force was yet hidden, the leader yet unknown. The troops
had been a motley bunch – trolls, lesser things that she had faced hundreds of times in as many
different quests, but to the last of them they had borne a flaming sigil, and Sif liked that not at all.
Flame, when it was from a foe, meant only ill, and when so many of the belly-crawlers and bottom-
feeders of the dark things in the realms had united under one sign...

Still, she could not shake the fact that this was all a distraction, that something else was coming,
something much bigger. Loki seemed to think so, and as their scouts reported to Edwik and thus to
Loki, Sif had little choice until she had more information.

_Perhaps I should go to dine with him,_ Sif thought as she made her way over to one of the training
yards. _At least then I might be able to learn something that could help._ Loki was frustratingly mum
on the subject of what they were up against, insisting he needed more proof, more confirmation.
Either he wasn’t getting it or he was keeping it from her, and she wasn’t sure which one was more
irritating, or more worrisome.

In the shadows of the colonnade surrounding the yard, Sif paused, looking out at the gathering in the
center of the sandy ring. They were new, this lot, her second class of them this morning. Many
looked unsuited to it right from the start – merely here to fulfill a sense of duty, of honor and social
obligation. She knew that call all too well.

A moment to collect herself then – she could not take her thoughts with her onto the sands, they
would weigh her down like the ill-fitting armor, clearly inherited armor in some cases, that so many
of the young men before her wore (always men, there were no women among them, another thing to
think on and make into a project) – and Sif strode out into the bright light, smiling just a bit as every
recruit snapped into a nearly perfect salute, their fists over their hearts.

Sometimes, it was very good to be queen.

* *

Sweaty and grimy, Sif left the training yard a few hours later, having put this newest batch of recruits through what paces they had. She was not gentle with them – they would get no coddling in battle, they ought to have none in training either – and had no doubt that some would resign their positions this very afternoon to take up places in the city where they were more useful and proficient. That suited her just fine, for it meant that the strongest (or the most stubborn) were left, and both she could work with.

She was in the middle of stripping off her dusty leather jacket when she saw Frigga, standing beside one of the columns near the staircase and talking with an officer. The old queen was not often out and about in the rest of the palace, though she was hardly a recluse caring for her husband alone, but it was still enough to make Sif slow her pace and run a hand through the tail of hair at the back of her head, grimacing as she felt grains of sand run down and stick to the sweat on her back.

*It is likely the preparations for Midsummer,* she thought to herself. *She did offer to help with it when I spoke to her last.* Unlike her husband, who seemed to think he was the only one who could do things correctly – a thought that made her almost snort in derision – Sif had no problem giving tasks to people who were better suited to them than she.

Frigga glanced over as Sif approached and smiled at the officer before her, clasping one of his hands in both of hers. “Tell your mother I send my regards, and thank her for her kind gifts,” she said quietly. Sif watched as the young man’s back straightened just a bit.

“I will, my lady,” he said with a bow. “Thank you for remembering her.”

“Lady Berit was one of my ladies-in-waiting until she married and went to live with your father in the northlands,” Frigga replied. “I think of her fondly.”

“She’ll be glad to know.” The officer bowed again, and a third time to Sif, and at a nod from both women turned and left.

Sif, feeling less prepared for a meeting with Frigga than she usually did, ran a hand through her hair again. “Good afternoon, my lady,” she said. “I’m sorry for my appearance.”

“That’s all right,” the older woman replied. “I have seen plenty of warriors looking as you do now, and my delicate sensibilities are not going to be offended by such things as the evidence of skill in battle. If they were, well… I would certainly have married into the wrong family, no?”

Sif smiled, though as ever she felt unrefined and coltish compared to Frigga’s grace when normally she paid little mind to such things. “Thank you. Is everything all right? What has brought you out of Fensalir and from the side of the Allfather?”

“This place is my home.” She gestured, and together they turned from the yards and made their way up the stairs slowly. It was a long walk from here to the royal residences, but most of the quickest route was along the terraces and promenades that looked out over the city, so it was not too terrible a thing to walk it. “I love my home, Sif, and I love the people in it as I love my sons. That is part of the essence of being a leader – a parental love, a sacrifice of self for the good of others. It is a thought you are familiar with, no doubt. Being a warrior of the realm engenders much of the same. I try to show people I am not some distant ruler who cares nothing for them. The oaths we both took when
we were crowned are to be taken to heart. Don’t think I believe you to be shirking that duty, dear,’”
and Frigga reached out and patted Sif’s gritty arm kindly, “I know you love Asgard well.”

“I do, my lady. I would give my life for the realm.”

“To become queen is to already have done so. Let us hope it never happens as you meant it, though.”

The terrace here was crowded, and both of them were stopped every few paces by this noble or that
supplicant. Sif envied the simple, heartfelt way that Frigga seemed to have as people swarmed
around her, the personal touch she added to each person she spoke to, promising to bring this issue or
that idea to the ear of the king. Sif tried her best to do the same, though some of the more scrupulous
nobles had barely-hidden sneers at her appearance.

At last, they made it through to the other end and continued up the stairs, and Frigga laughed at the
expression of relief on Sif’s face. “You look more exhausted now than you did when you left the
yard,” she said.

“Battle is something I understand completely and can speak the language of. Sometimes I wonder if
the people who come to me at court are speaking something else entirely. I am not the one talented
with words, though, that’s…” she trailed off.

“Loki may have the words, but people and interactions with them have always been difficult for him.
Not that he is shy, but understanding them is not something he knows how to do easily. It is one
thing to go among them as we have now, to say the right words with the right inflections, but it is
another thing to mean them.”

They walked in silence for a moment, only the jingle of Sif’s armor and the soft swish of their
guards’ cloaks counterpoint to the muted sound of voices from below on the terrace. “Sometimes I
wonder if Loki means anything he says,” she murmured at last.

It was wrong, and Sif knew it – she had seen the look in his eyes when he had confronted her in the
courtyard after she’d ridden out with the Three, and could not deny that what she had seen there was
true. She knew Loki did not communicate what was in his heart through words but through subtlety,
though she wished he would simply be honest with her…

Frigga seemed to know Sif didn’t mean it. “Thor used to make the jest that Loki is incapable of being
sincere in anything, and often I wonder if Loki does what he can to perpetuate that,” she replied.
“You would know that he keeps himself locked away, hidden behind many doors, though. You have
been his friend for a long time, and you are his wife now.”

It was true. Even now, as much as Sif still felt the pain keenly, she knew that other than Frigga, she
herself probably knew Loki’s true thoughts best out of anyone in the realm now. “He should not,”
she muttered. They fell silent again for a moment. “I don’t understand why he does it,” she continued
at last, quietly. “Why he does these things that only hurt himself.”

“I cannot say myself,” Frigga replied. “He is my child and I love him, but some things about him I
can only speculate on, and speculation taken as fact results in more pain. Both of you have put
yourselves and each other through enough of that – needlessly, in my opinion,” and Sif could not
fault the old queen on her rather pointed tone at that. “Not that I think you were wrong to be upset as
you were, as I have told you before. But you must give him the chance to make amends, even if it
does not set everything right. I might not understand my own son fully, but I know when he knows
he has done wrong. I did teach him that much, though he hardly seems to listen to me betimes…”
“He asked me to dine with him tonight.” Sif pursed her lips together, looking down at the polished stone floor as they walked.

“Did he?” Frigga had a rather calculating look in her eyes. “Are you going to?”

“I… I am not sure, my lady.”

“And why not?”

A dozen things to say rushed through her mind before Sif blurted one out. “Because he lied! Because he knew what he was, and did not trust me with it! Because he thinks that because he plays people as others play instruments, that everyone around him is trying to do the same to him. Because he…” she took a breath. “Because despite all of that and everything else that has happened since that trip to Jotunheim we never should have let Thor drag us on, I care about him.”

“Then go.”

“I cannot simply forgive him for it…”

“Then don’t. I could hardly fault you for it.” Frigga stopped and so Sif did too, knowing the turmoil in her heart showed plainly on her face. “There is nothing simple about forgiveness. But it cannot happen if you do not give it the chance.” She reached out and laid her hand on Sif’s arm again. “You want to understand why Loki does the things he does, but you cannot simply wait for him to come to you with it, nor is it solely your burden to drag it out of him. It is something the two of you must come to terms with together.”

“How can we?” Sif looked away. “He lied to me, to Thor, to Asgard…”

“Yet you still care for him, despite knowing the truth of his parentage and knowing all his faults. That puts you far ahead of most people in the court, wouldn’t you say?”

“If I may be honest, my lady…”

“I should hope so, after all this.”

“…I do not trust half the court to have my back in so much as a sparring match when there is nothing in it for them.”

Frigga pretended to think a moment, but the smile tugging at her mouth was true. “I cannot disagree too much,” she said at last. “Though most of them are good people at their core. The court makes cutthroat bandits out of all who do not go in with a stalwart heart.” She reached over and took Sif’s hand as they walked, and the warrior felt a sense of comfort wash over her. It unbound the knot in her shoulders and calmed the storm in her mind and her heart, for the moment. “Trust starts somewhere. Give Loki a chance to explain himself and attempt to make amends. Even if that is only the first step, it is still one step.”

She had a point, and Sif could find no way around it. “I will think on it,” she promised, though really, that was as good as an agreement. She could always leave dinner if Loki grated too much on her nerves. She hoped he wouldn’t, though.

“That is all I can ask.” Frigga let Sif’s hand go. “Now, I have been thinking on preparations for Midsummer…”

“It’s over a week away yet!”
“Only a week,” Frigga said. “And with things as they are in the realms, this feast day is more important than ever. Even if it is only for those who are at court, the whole city joins in the celebration. It gives everyone something to look forward to. Something to be happy about. Stars above know that we all need that right now.”

* 

She had never been given to the same kinds of things as most of the other women at court – spending hours agonizing over what to wear, how to do her hair, the like – but after she’d bathed for the second time that day to make sure all the grime and dust was out of her hair and off her skin, Sif found herself staring at her wardrobe, lost. What did one wear to a dinner with one’s husband when one wanted to both wring his neck and pull him in for a very deep and satisfying kiss?

“Odin’s eye,” she muttered, and grabbed the first one that came to hand. It suited her just fine, a deep crimson frock that she’d had for a long time. Perhaps not the most up-to-date and fashionable, but it was only dinner with Loki. He’d seen her naked, and if he complained about what she was wearing she’d simply leave.

To this she added a few pieces of jewelry and, after a moment’s consideration, fished the comb Loki had given her so long ago out of where it had been shoved to the back. She hesitated, turning it over in her hands, watching the metal iridescence shift subtly from silver to green to gold and back. Inconstant, ever-changing. She should have known, really, but when had they ever paid much mind to the second prince, the queer and quiet young man with abilities none of them fully understood? Maybe that had been the problem. It certainly hadn’t helped.

Sif gave herself a little shake. Loki had made his choices, and now he had to deal with what happened when they bore fruit.

Comb in place, Sif made her way to the terrace. It was a fine place for a dinner; planter boxes were full of well-tended plants, their perfume not as cloying as the garlands at Ostara had been but rather just right. It helped that it was all open, too, not closed in even by pillars and gauzy draperies, and close to one of the rivers that ran through the city so that a cool breeze kept the air moving enough. With the light turning the golden color of early evening, it was almost romantic, or would have been if the circumstances were different.

Loki was already there. Not at the table, which was set with two covered dishes and all the rest, but standing with his back to her, looking out over the city. It was a familiar sight.

_for someone who has no love for this place, he certainly spends a lot of time looking at it_, Sif thought, then wondered if that was right. Loki did nothing unless he wanted to, and resentment or not, he had done some good as king. He may have wanted it badly enough to sabotage every relationship of meaning to him, but he had never asked for it.

But she was no philosopher and certainly she was not her husband, to muse upon such things. So she tilted her chin up and cleared her throat pointedly. Loki looked back over his shoulder.

“I heard you walk up,” he said. “I was just thinking, and looking at the city.” He rested his knuckles on the top rail of the balustrade, the faintest smile on his lips. “You look lovely, Sif.”

There was a rustle as all but one of the attendants who were finishing up with the table left, and they were alone again. Sif didn’t move though, watching Loki carefully. Giving a compliment without expecting something in return was not what he did. Still, she tilted her chin slightly. Loki sighed after a moment and gestured at the table.
“Will you sit with me?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

They took their seats, and the remaining attendant uncovered their dishes before leaving the terrace to wait inside with the rest. For a long time there was only silence, and the soft noises as cups were poured and plates arranged to their liking before eating. It was not a comfortable silence, as it had been with them before. It was charged with something else now, something that made her want to shift, made her hands itch for her glaive rather than the knife and fork they grasped. She understood that, at least. She did not understand why Loki had asked her here, or why he seemed to alternate between trying to catch her eye and looking away.

At last, he broke the silence. “Your training of our new recruits seems to be going well.”

“It goes as well as one might expect. Many have no business with a blade, many think they have better grasp of it than I do. I weed out the least suited and wait to see how many of the best return for the next session.”

“We will need them, every last one. Things seem to be growing worse in the realms far more quickly than I anticipated.” At Sif’s snort, Loki looked back at her. “You find that funny?”

“I find it difficult to believe you do not anticipate things,” she replied. “Difficult to believe you ever stop playing your games. ‘You are always steps ahead of everyone else. Are you already planning our victory celebrations?’”

“I cannot plan for something I do not know for certain will happen.”

“And when have you been uncertain of anything?” She set her goblet down, looking over at Loki completely unimpressed. “You always speak ill of your brother for his cockiness, and yet you have it in spades yourself. Just infinitely more subtle than Thor.”

Hurt flickered across his face for a moment before being pulled back in carefully, smoothed and sanded away. “Subtlety was never his strong suit.”

“Not like evading the point is your strength.”

“I see the point.” Loki gazed at her steadily. “I am not certain of everything, Sif, and certainly not about this foe we face.”

“If it is so worrisome, why keep it to yourself?” The accusation was in her voice – the thought that he kept so much hidden that he would harm himself, their people, and Asgard and all the realms for want of playing his cards close to the breast. Loki passed a hand over his face.

“I did not ask you here to talk of strategy, Sif,” he said.

“Then why did you?” She sucked in a breath. “Why is it that I always find myself asking you that question - why? Why do you not tell us what we need to know, why do you treat everything as though it is a game, why do you lie to the ones you say you care for—“

Sif could feel the heat starting on her face the more she watched him close up. She was hardly angry anymore – those first days after returning from Jotunheim she had been wrathful, and the smallest thoughts of his transgressions had made her wroth – but now it was less anger than disappointment. She wanted to make things right with him, but her pride would not brook her capitulating, and Loki…
“I asked you here because I wanted to apologize.”

…well, there was a first time for everything. Sif opened her mouth, closed it again. “You—what?”

Loki took a breath. “You are my wife,” he said, and she could see the tension on his face. This was no easy thing for him to do, admitting his misdeeds. “I swore to treat you with respect and honor the oaths we made, and I have not done so.”

Sif bit back saying that the oaths ought not be the only reason he was apologizing, tried (and failed) to keep her surprise off her face, and hauled into check the surge of hope and warmth in her chest that Loki’s words caused. She had not heard him apologize sincerely for anything in far too long.

“I deceived you, and in my anger at you for things you could not help but be ignorant of, and at myself for thinking I could not trust you with them, I said—many things I regret.” Another deep breath. “They were true words which I cannot deny, but ill-spoken. I have put you in this position you didn’t want, and to add insult to that was wrong. You know that I have always used words like I use my knives.”

“Stealthy and sharp,” Sif replied, a little acid in her tone. But there was still too much surprise for there to be much. “Yes, I know.”

“It was not only your duty to Asgard or your feeling of indebtedness to my mother that made you marry me, either. I know that – I knew it – but I knew that turning that on you would hurt the most.” He picked absently at a loose thread in the pale gold cloth covering the table. “I always know what hurts people the most.”

“You make it your business.” Sif regretted the edge to her voice instantly, but it was an arrow already loosed. She took a deep breath of her own. “For you to even think it was only duty was insulting. Do you truly not know that there are those here who do care for you, Loki? You needn’t bear your burdens alone. Not ruling the realms, not the truth of you being a—of your parentage…”

“You can say it,” Loki told her, and there was a twist to his lips that put her teeth on edge again. “You can say I am a Jotunn. I already know.”

Her hands became fists. “The truth of you being a Jotunn, then,” she snapped. His walls were coming back up, and a part of her felt despair for it.

“If we’re being truthful, we may as well be truthful about that.” Loki met her eyes steadily, and she liked not at all the way he had so easily slipped back into holding her at arm’s length. “Perhaps my origins are what make it so easy for me to spin lies.”

“Do you think yourself like them?” she blurted. “Do you think you must be like them?” When Loki gave her a confused look, she just glared at him. “I have tread the path of must be, Loki, and you know well where that almost took me. I don’t look at you and see a Jotunn.”

Sif waited for him to reply, but when he only looked away, lips pursed, she rose from her seat. Almost, she thought sadly. What will it take, Loki? When will you stop trying to protect yourself from people who only want to help you?

“But you don’t believe that,” she continued. “So when you do, tell me.”

She didn’t look back as she left.

*
Midsummer was upon them. Normally, this would have meant fishing expeditions at the realm’s outposts situated by oceans or lakes; all those young warriors who hoped to prove themselves worthy of taking their oaths would be sent on quests to prove their valor and strength. Now, though, the expeditions were put off in favor of preparing for war, and soon there would be real battles enough for those who wanted to swear themselves to the realm. There was no need for playing at it, as the quests did.

As it had been with their wedding, the palace was a hive of activity. The day before the great feast, the decorations went up, and as queen Sif had to set aside her training and duties as warrior and take up the duties of her title. She was not terribly talented at it, having spent more time chasing the princes around in the dirt than learning how to manage a household (much less a palace) but she was good at giving orders, and the servants and others brought in for the occasion knew what they were doing. It went as smoothly as could be expected, at least, and that was a small blessing.

Sif tried not to think about her dinner with Loki the week before, and between training and preparations she was mostly successful. He had been sincere about his apology, of that she was sure, but he had been the one to derail things once more, and far from feeling like they were on the right path Sif felt like they were treading water, running hard and fast only to stay in the same place. His apology had been a step, as Frigga had said. But it was still only a step, and when she and Loki entered the feast, she felt that he was as far away as he had been at their wedding even though she was on his arm. He had seemed subdued to her, though. Perhaps he was thinking on his next move. She wouldn’t put it past him.

Dinner passed by without a hitch. There were plenty there who wanted to come speak to her regarding preparations for the inevitable first major battle of the war (interesting even to Sif, who felt the call of battle sing in her blood, that they never even considered that the whole thing might be avoided somehow), and Loki was surrounded by his own cluster of courtiers and nobles who wanted the ear of the king, so she did not have to look at him too much through dinner as the musicians circulated through the tables and the ladies in their bright gowns and the lords in their polished armor.

She had to admit, though, when he stood in his green-and-gold finery and made all the appropriate toasts, speaking the ritual words as the last light slipped below the horizon – perfect timing, as always – he looked like a king ought. He was not Thor, who shone like the branches of Yggdrasil themselves. Loki was a star that someone had thrown a blanket over. The light was dimmed, but it was bright enough to glow through the cloth. She dropped her eyes to her own goblet, holding it aloft until the toast and the speeches had been made.

Sif had engaged some of the older warriors in discussion, a favorite pastime of hers; some were still of the belief that women had no place on the battlefield, and so when she would argue the merits of her glaive – its reach more than made up for her own lack, her weapon was by itself a versatile one – she tended to become quite passionate. It was really no fault of her own that she missed the return of the musicians, or the way that so many were filtering away from the long tables and toward the long half-oval that split off midway down the feast hall’s length. When the warriors turned away, though, Sif was about to jest that a woman could best them with wits as well as weapons when she turned to see Loki looking at her expectantly.

“Is there something you need?” she asked.

“It is tradition on high feast days that when there is dancing, the king and queen have the first number to open it.” There was a decidedly sly look in his eyes, one that she liked not at all.

“Well, let it be broken,” she muttered into her goblet. “Stars above know that we’ve done that enough already.”
“Will one dance be such a blow to you?” He dropped his voice. She wished he wouldn’t. “Sif, they need to see that even though there’s a war coming, some things remain normal. It’s but one dance. What could happen?”

*My resolve could crumble, Sif thought to herself. It may show on my face how I feel despite what you’ve done, because under all of your misdeeds there is the boy who made me smile by causing the knives and forks to joust. That boy did not manipulate others to do his bidding; that boy was not bitter and closed off from those who care for him.*

“I can think of a great number of things capable of going awry when you are involved,” she replied, but conceded his point. “Know that if you try to be too *forward*…”

“I am the very picture of gentle manners.” The musicians were taking their place off to one side, between two of the gold columns, and guests had begun to gather in two arcs to either side of where they had set up. Sif took one last bracing swallow of her mead and slipped her hand into Loki’s, feeling the rush of heat that had nothing to do with the drink, and the accompanying irritation with him did little to quench it or quell that one inexplicable thing that made her heart clench.

“I cannot believe you to be gentle or *mannered* in anything you will not get something out of,” she hissed out of the corner of her mouth as they swept onto the dance floor together amid polite applause, the wine-colored skirts of her gown rustling around her feet, and took their places in the center of the floor. The metal of Loki’s ceremonial armor was cool under her hand, but his skin warmed to her touch. Stubbornly Sif met his eyes. She would not let him win.

Of course, then he had to snake his arm around her her back and pull her closer, and smile thinly when she glared at him. “This dance requires us to be a little more intimate, my lady,” he said. Sif wanted to punch the smug tone right out of him, but instead forced a smile of her own. She hoped it was as pointed as the edges of his knives.

“You did this on purpose,” she accused, following his lead as the music started. He was right; this was a lover’s dance. Partners had to be close.

Loki affected innocence. “I can only make suggestions,” he said. “Far be it from me to try to control artistry of this nature.”

“Enough of your silver words.” Sif let herself be spun out and back. “And enough of your *games*, or do you not recall that those are what got us here in the first place?”

“I don’t forget things, Sif.” A quick turn under his arm, and she felt the metal of his breastplate chill the skin across her shoulders. His breath hissed gently (damn him to Hel, she had only just *said*) against her ear. “I don’t *forget* that I wronged you, or that I want to do what I can to make amends. I don’t break all my promises, I remember ours vows to Vár. Of course…” Their hands entwined, Sif stepped away and twisted, twirling out a little less gracefully than she could have, only to be pulled back in until their faces were only inches apart. “If I recall, you weren’t entirely honest with me about remaining here rather than running off to fight with your friends. Not being entirely honest is still telling a lie.”

Stung, Sif blurted out, “You lied first.” It was as bad a defense as a piece of crystal was against a charging horse, but she was upset and could not deny the heat, curled and demanding, in her belly. *Only he could make me want to hit him in the mouth and then kiss him.*

“I thought we weren’t using that argument.” Their hands slipped down each other’s arms, gripping hard when they reached the wrists. Loki pulled her in a little more forcefully than necessary, and she accidentally on purpose stepped on one of his feet. He grimaced, and Sif let herself smirk a little.
“It’s still true. You’ve done little to rectify it.”

“How can I?” Despite that they were surrounded by onlookers, Loki had let something slip in his face. The laughing, mocking look and tone were gone and though she wouldn’t say he was completely unguarded, Sif sensed he was close. Desperate, then, to show her this before other people. The quip she’d had ready died on her tongue.

“You see me as little as possible,” he said quietly. “Our soldiers have seen more of you in the last month than I have. I have apologized—”

“And sent that spinning off course most spectacularly.”

“Sif, please.” The steps were slow and uncomplicated here, and Sif was glad, because there was something very vulnerable in Loki’s eyes that she had only seen a few times before. *The spark that feeds the fire*, she thought, barely even registering the other sounds in the hall anymore. *That’s what it is.*

“These are not the words I have skill with,” he said, and sounded disdainful – no, disappointed. “Speeches, the right things to say to motivate recalcitrant diplomats and lords, the silvered words of a tactician, and the honeyed tongue of a poet, these are the things I can do, but not all things are as easy to say as that.”

“They are,” Sif murmured. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and she let it slide down to where she could feel the muscles of his arm under soft green fabric. Her fingers curled into it as the music picked up and their steps picked up with it.

When she had first started out as a warrior, she had been trained not to look at her opponent’s feet, but to look at his eyes and his torso. Those were where their next move would come from, she learned. She looked into Loki’s eyes, and knew what he was going to say, because for once she could read him as she read her opponents in the training yard. It was a terrifying, giddy, powerful thing.

“Sif,” he said, and she felt the coil in her belly tighten down another notch with the way he said it. “Sif, I—”

He broke off, glancing away over her shoulder, and she twisted in his arms as the musicians cut off, their music being drowned out in the sound of started cries and shrieks. She thought of the knife she’d strapped to one of her thighs. It wasn’t easily reached, but Loki was at hand, and though she did not trust him as she would trust a warrior in battle, she trusted him to at least do the right thing in a room full of witnesses and start throwing magic at whatever needed stopping. It would give her enough time to crouch down and grab her weapon to join the fray.

The crowd parted, and the battle tension in her muscles eased, giving way to confusion and then to shock when she saw what it was that was causing the stir.

A soldier – one of theirs, by the gold cloth woven in with his armor, was on his knees on the polished floor. Gathering her skirts in hand she pushed through the guests beginning to crowd him again and knelt beside him. Blood splattered his bronze armor – red, Asgardian red, the black of troll’s blood, all mixed in with dirt and grime and sweat and other, unidentifiable things. His eyes were dazed, and glancing at his dirty blond hair – yes, she saw the blood crusted particularly in one place. He held one hand pressed to his side, other arm hanging limp and useless from a slice that went through his chain mail and nearly to the bone. The mail had been forced into his skin. He was obviously in enough pain to make even her feel sympathy pangs in her joints.
“What happened?” she asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. The soldier raised his eyes to peer at her, made a noise, and crumpled.

Loki was beside them both, one hand glowing slightly as he pressed it to the soldier’s chest. The glow seemed to dissolve into the man, and his eyes opened again. Loki raised his head, looking round at the nobles pressing in once more. She saw his mouth compress to a thin line in annoyance.

“Call for Eir, one of you!” he said, command clear in his voice. Several guests broke off and ran for the door. “The rest, back four paces – four big paces!” When he was satisfied, he conjured a simple pillow out of thin air and slipped it under the soldier’s head, then took the man’s face in his hands and leaned in.

“Tell me,” he said. “What happened?”

The soldier began to speak.

*

All the ministers and officers that Loki had called in with him had been at the feast, and none of them had had time to go back to their chambers and change into something more appropriate. It was odd, seeing all of them standing around the table in their finery. Sif did not feel the least out of place in her gown, though, and would not have even if she were the only one dressed as such. War was beginning, and she would not waste time on aesthetics.

The light flashed off Loki’s gold bracers when he rested his hands on the table. Only Sif saw him crook a finger slightly; to all the rest, the Nine Realms and their attendant outposts rose out of the table suddenly, though the slight halo of green-gold around each probably gave the trick away. “From what we have been able to get out of the messenger so far,” Loki said, ignoring the murmurs that rippled around at this use of magic, “The encampment is here—” the other realms fell away in favor of a large view of Svartalfheim, and Loki pointed at a valley bounded by snowcapped mountains and shaped like a crescent, “—near the forge of a rather well-known dwarf smith specializing in enchanted weaponry. I need not name him.”

He looked around the table. “This is, as far as we can tell, not the bulk of our opponent’s army. He is keeping them elsewhere, possibly still in his own stronghold, but this force here represents a substantial portion.”

“You speak as though you know who this foe is,” one of the officers, a man just under Sif in terms of military rank, said. He was not a friend to Loki, but he was a good man who knew his duty and lived with honor. Sif respected him, though the look he gave the king was one she could understand. “If you know, you must tell us.”

For a moment Loki’s eyes met Sif’s, and then he tilted his chin up and took a breath. “I have had my suspicions for a time, when I began to hear word from those I had sent to the realms unfriendly to Asgard to keep me apprised of their sentiments. The change of a regime is a tumultuous time, you must understand.” He paused. “Those who had made their covers in the fortress of one of our oldest foes reported the sound of a hammer striking metal, day and night, and a strange darkness like twilight that fell over the lands around them for weeks. Then one day, the sounds finished and the darkness lifted. That was when we first began to hear of raids. My intelligence indicated that the parties originated from Muspelheim.”

By the sudden pallor on some faces – and the sudden dread in her heart – Sif knew the others had begun to have their own suspicions. But Loki’s next words confirmed it.
“In the last week, I have been able to confirm it – and of course, the soldier from our post there lent further proof by his own experiences – a enemy none of you have faced, but all of you have heard of, has risen again. We face Surtur, the demon from whence all the others trace their heritage.”

“Odin’s beard,” someone muttered. Sif’s stomach had dropped out, as though she fell off the edge of Asgard itself.

“The Allfather was the last of us to face him, long before my birth,” Loki said. “Would that he were awake.”

“Is he—there?” One of the ministers asked, gesturing at the hovering map. “Is he with the encampment?”

“The soldier says he is not, and that one of his generals – a rather nasty fire giant by the name of Torg – heads these forces. Torg is bloodthirsty and zealous in his support of Surtur, and apparently takes orders only from him as well. He is there, supposedly, to procure one last bit of magic to finish the forging of Surtur’s twilight blade, which the dwarf has yet to give him – or at least, we hope he does. This one is stubborn and will demand much for something so important. The dwarves who have chosen these solitary lives always do.”

To Sif’s surprise he did not lapse into the sullen moment of silence that nobody would have blamed him for, given his past dealings with the dwarves, but pressed on ahead.

“We must make sure Torg never receives this thing he needs.”

It was well into the night, past the midnight hour, when they all at last came to a plan they agreed on. The soldier had said the dwarf was still not close to giving in to Torg’s demands – Surtur’s resources were vast, and he probably wanted as much of that vastness as he could get – and it would take time to rally the troops they would need. At dawn, the soldiers would ride, and Sif would ride at their head.

That last part had been a bitter, hard-fought battle of itself. Loki had not come out and said it but he didn’t want her to go, and Sif, as well as the others, had argued long before he would give in. As they were leaving, preparing to catch a few hours’ rest before they had to begin preparations, Loki called her back.

Jaw set, she turned and stalked up the length of the table. “If you’re going to try to dissuade me from going, Loki—”

“No.” He leaned on the table, looking at her intently. “I ought to know better by now, really.”

“Yes, you really ought to know.” She crossed her arms. “What is it?”

“There’s something I didn’t tell the others that I think it important for you to know.” The corner of his mouth turned up at the sudden look of surprise that she could only imagine came over her face. “I told you I wished to make amends.”

“So I am beginning to see.” She let her arms drop. “Tell me.”

“The soldier was part of a force that I sent to watch over that smithy some weeks ago, and the only ones who knew apart from myself were several of the members of this council here tonight – but I only told them a few days ago. The force had been undisturbed until now, and there was no indication that any of Surtur’s forces knew they were there. But suddenly, tonight, they are slaughtered almost to the last man.”

Sif caught his implication immediately. “You suspect one of the council members who knew of this
force.”

“There are a few other options, but yes, I do. But for now, there is little we can do.” He glanced at the door that they had all left through, then back at her. “Not until we discover if there is a spy, and who they are.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. I trust them little enough, but you are the only one I know I can trust enough to tell.”

There was an awkward pause, where Loki would not look at her and Sif stared at him. Tonight was full of surprises, and she wasn’t sure if she liked them yet. It was good that Loki was trying to make things better – and that was what she wanted – and yet it scared her. She had spent a long time thinking of him one way. To have the baseline suddenly shift left her off-balance, and that was something neither one of them could afford to be right now.

“I had better go sleep,” she said at last, quietly. “You should as well.”

“There is much I have to do.”

“And I as well, but you’ll be useless if you don’t let your mind slow down for half a moment.”

“Concerned?”

She drew in a breath. “Shouldn’t I be?” she asked, and left it at that. He let his head drop a moment, then straightened.

“I’ll see you off in the morning,” he said. “Goodnight, Sif.”

She hesitated only a moment before turning, almost asking the thing she wanted of him, almost—

“Goodnight, Loki,” was all that she could get out before leaving for her bed. Not yet, she told herself. Not yet.

*

Morning dawned misty and chilly, wisps of steam rising out of the city’s waterways and curling over the buildings from the light warming the waters of the edge. In the great wide grounds before the palace, the soldiers had already assembled, milling about and talking quietly. Everything was muted, and not just because of the mist diffusing the first rays of light hitting the grounds; everyone knew this was the opening battle of the war. How this went would be a tell for all battles to follow.

Sif, holding her helmet under her arm as she checked over her horse’s tack, could hear the nervous laughter of some of the more adept recruits who had been mixed in with the seasoned forces. It was important to test them, to see how much mettle they truly had. Those who returned would tell the stories to their fellows. It encouraged healthy competition, but as their leader, she wondered if they were ready, or if she led them to their deaths.

It is honorable to die in battle, she reminded herself, making sure the clasps securing the dark red half-cape to her shoulders held firm. That is the kind of valor every warrior wants, to die and be taken to Valhalla. Still, it was difficult to forget that this was her first real battle as well. Quests, skirmishes… they weren’t the same. The stories wouldn’t be the same.

One of her officers came up and reported that the soldiers were ready, and Heimdall would activate the Bifrost on her command. She nodded in acknowledgement, turning as the officer left to see Loki
approaching, the officers parted around him with their hands fisted over their hearts.

“Everything is ready?” he asked, after they stared at each other a moment. Sif nodded, and though his face and body posture didn’t change there was a shift in his eyes, a slight tell in the way that he smoothed one hand over the sleeve of his coat, the mail at elbow and shoulder glinting in the morning light. When he didn’t continue either, though, she turned back to checking her gear.

“If you have something to say, you should say it,” she told him. “I cannot read your mind to guess at what it is.”

“Only that I expect you’ll return in short order,” Loki said at last, and though it sounded like his usual tone of voice there was something else in it too.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “Should I bring you a token to show you I did my duty?”

“I have no doubt that you will do your duty. But Torg’s head will make an astonishingly wonderful addition to the oddities in the Vault.”

Sif felt herself smile a little before she could call it back. “Be careful what you wish for, dear husband,” she said. “I cannot imagine what you would do with Torg’s head, anyway.”

“Make it tell jests at feasts.”

“I did not know you had a penchant for the macabre.”

“I don’t.” Suddenly he was close, a hand resting on her horse’s neck. “Sif, if you do not return, I—“

“I’ll return. I will.” She looked up at him defiantly. “Have a little more faith in my skills, even if you have little faith in me.”

He stared at her, and Sif tightened her fingers on the strap she’d been tying down on her saddle until he nodded slightly and stepped away. Pulling her helmet on, Sif mounted up, taking the reins of her charger in hand and listening to the shouts of her men as they saw her in readiness and began forming up into their ranks.

“His head, remember,” Loki said, standing at her knee. His eyes were very green in the light. Sif nodded, and was proud of herself for keeping the shake out of her fingers. “Strike true, Sif.”

“I will.” Turning her charger’s head she moved them into a trot, breaking into a canter as soon as she was in the front of the army. The thunder of hooves deafened those who had gathered to watch, and the light flashing through the multicolored crystal of the rainbow bridge as Heimdall opened the Bifrost made them turn their faces away. Energy and magic crackled around them, becoming so intense as to burn even through closed eyes. And then they were gone, only the roiling mists to tell of their passing.
You know how sometimes words get away from you and then you lose control of your own creation? Yeah, that was this chapter. Thank you all for sticking with this and reading and commenting, I always really appreciate it. And a big thank you to my two betas for their help on this chapter. Lord knows I needed it.

As I'm still not sure what Maria Hill or Nick Fury's characterization will be in Avengers, I did my best with them. Please let me know what you guys think, it'll be a great help for future chapters.

*mechanics:* the branch of physics concerned with the behavior of physical bodies when subjected to forces or displacements, and the subsequent effects of the bodies on their environment.

He stood on the metal walkway, looking down at the pillar of rock that Mjolnir was buried in. The Midgard scientists had told him that when it had been thrown to earth, the heat and pressure from the impact had fused the dirt into stone. Mjolnir was powerful, this he knew; its magic could break down stone or create it. The scientists had been so enthralled by it and whole encounter had reminded him painfully of when Loki would get excited about some spell or bit of knowledge he had uncovered in his reading, of how he would lose his collected demeanor and become animated, talk with his hands, no longer closed off but open and smiling.

_Forgive me, brother_, he thought, not for the first time. _I was too ignorant then to know the gift I had in you._

Thor descended the steps the rest of the way, his boots crunching on desert sand and loose pebbles. Most of the personnel hadn’t appeared yet; it was barely dawn, and though the clouds above threatened rain and thunder rumbled in the distance, none fell yet and no lightning crashed overhead. He liked the stillness of this time of day, before the scientists could swarm him with questions and the ones they called psychologists would try to understand _why_ he could not lift the hammer yet.

But today the air seemed electric as he considered the handle of his weapon. Thousands of times he had borne it into battle, and the leather grip still looked as new as when he had lifted it from its cradle in the vault. When his fingers curled around it, it felt right and familiar, like coming home.

Except that no matter how he pulled or twisted, Mjolnir remained stuck fast in its pedestal of rock, and he remained mortal. Thor felt heat prickle his eyes, and turned away from it before he could show weakness in front of those few who had assembled to watch from the walkways. Still not good enough.

Up above, Darcy made a quiet noise and twisted her hand around the rail. She’d been the one to drive Thor out here, roused by him at some ungodly hour of the morning after she’d crashed out on her couch with reruns of _I Dream of Jeannie_ on the television. He’d had that look in his eyes like he couldn’t wait, and she’d taken pity on him. She knew what it was like to feel like you didn’t have a purpose in life. Jane had her research, Darcy had her full-time job of helping Jane slowly replace her blood with coffee, but all Thor had to do was try to play the most underhanded game of pin-the-tail-
on-the-emotional-donkey ever. It was probably tough for the guy who’d always been the favorite not to feel deflated when even his best suddenly wasn’t good enough for dear old dad.

She pushed away from the railing. Thor probably wanted some time alone to think – he usually did, when he made these attempts – and for being a g-man outpost in the middle of the desert, the coffee wasn’t bad. As far as Darcy was concerned, if her tax dollars were going to these people, she was going to take as much advantage of it as she could. With one last glance back down where Thor had taken a seat on a plastic crate, she went to go track down the origin of that delicious caffeine-laden scent.

* 

“So that’s him, huh?”

Coulson shut off the video feed and after a moment, the electric-blue SHIELD logo popped up again, rotating slowly on its axis. “Thor,” he said. “God of thunder and storms.”

Tony Stark let out a disparaging noise somewhere between a snort and a scoff (how many noises the man had for showing he thought something was lower than the dirt on the soles of his sneakers was something nobody had discovered yet), swiveling back and forth in his chair in the briefing room they all sat in. “He looks like some Arnold Schwarzenegger knockoff. Why do we want him to come play for our team, again?”

“Because he’s not entirely human.” Fury crossed his arms on the table, peering over at Tony. “He’s an alien prince from a realm called Asgard, and if he joins us we may have a way to understand some of the things we’ve been sitting on at SHIELD for the better part of the century. Things your father worked on.” He paused, then continued, in a very slightly less severe tone of voice. “And because he’s supposedly possessed of great physical strength, the power to control the weather…”

Tony gave Fury a very patient look. If the man was at all intimidated by the director of SHIELD – which, most of the people at the table would agree, was the wisest course of action – then he never seemed to show it. “All the mumbo-jumbo about whatever tech you’ve got locked away that you won’t let me look at aside, that would be great,” he said. “If he seemed even remotely capable of any of it. He can’t even get that hammer whatever-it’s-called—“

“Mjolnir.”

“—out of the dirt, so…”

“And you think you can?” Fury arched a brow.

“You wanna try me?” Tony spread his hands. “Try me. We can get on one of my planes and go right now—“

“No. We have more confidence in Thor than you do.”

“How will we know when he’s…” Steve Rogers, hunched over his display, ran a finger over a line of the report Coulson had filed for their perusal after his spate of trips to New Mexico. “…worthy?”

“He seems to think that the hammer will just return to him whenever the criteria for this… spell,” and the way Coulson said that indicated just what he thought about having to use that word to describe something, “To be unraveled have been met. Whatever that means.” His face was neutral, but it seemed Coulson would believe it when he saw it. Then again, they were all a little skeptical, which was funny, because they had supersoldiers and genius engineers and those were okay, but somehow there was a line between them and the idea of a demigod. Maybe it just had to be drawn somewhere.
“He probably means it’ll return to his hand.” When everyone gave him a look, Steve shrugged. “I read a lot as a kid. In the myths, Mjolnir always returns to Thor’s hand whenever he throws it or leaves it somewhere.”

“We’re familiar with the relevant mythology.” Fury pushed a few things around on his display. “Though we’re still not sure how much of it is true.”

“Has nobody stopped to think that maybe, just maybe, this guy’s just someone’s escaped science fair experiment on steroids?” Tony gestured at Steve. “I mean, we’ve already got one.”

There was a moment where Steve paused, holding back the sharp side of his tongue. “I can’t say I understand all the science of it,” he said, slowly and patiently. “But it seems like he’s not even really human. He’s close, but there are some things that just don’t work the same way in him as they do in us. Beyond that, I’d have to talk to him. He doesn’t seem crazy, though.” Steve looked at the screen they’d been watching. “Just kind of… sad. Like he’s got a piece missing, but not in the crazy way.”

“Well, at present he’s our best bet for moving some of our projects forward.” Fury stood. “That’ll be all for now, gentlemen. Thank you.”

Coulson fell into step beside the director as they left the boardroom. Behind him he could already hear Stark gearing up into his usual assault on Rogers’ sensibilities, and was glad that the door hissed shut behind them a moment later. Stark was brilliant, a good man to have around when your back was against the wall, but he was abrasive and narcissistic and a little bit of both of those went a really, really long way.

Fury seemed to have read Coulson’s mind. “Sometimes, I really wish I could just kick Stark out on his ass.”

“Me too, sir.” He consulted his phone. “Barton’s due to check in from Albuquerque half an hour from now. We received an encrypted data burst from Romanoff updating her status – it seems she’s let herself be taken in. I’m not worried.”

“Romanoff knows what she’s doing.” The door to the helicarrier’s command center opened at their approach and bright sunlight assaulted Coulson’s eyes. He blinked twice rapidly to clear the spots from his eyes as he walked, and joined Fury and Maria Hill at Command.

“Attention all stations - status check,” Hill said, and the process began. The windows darkened, displays brightening as data and images scrolled across them while each critical station in the command center checked in.

“Communications normal.”

“Power at optimum.”

“Telemetry clear.”

“Weapons clear.”

“Field Ops reports green across the board.”

“Events registered in upper atmosphere since last check. Sending the data to the command console now.”

Fury tapped a few of the displays; pictures, both visual and infrared, appeared under his fingers. “Any contacts?”
“Three, sir.” Hill highlighted the appropriate ones on her display and the selections spread apart on Fury’s, the rest falling away. “Indications are that the origin point for each is the same.”

“Level of incursion?”

“Unknown. The events don’t leave the same markings as the ones in New Mexico did, and by the time our teams get there the site’s always deserted. We think this is a different… source.” Hill pressed her lips together; the more esoteric things like this still were difficult for her to understand. Coulson didn’t pretend to, most of the time, but Maria Hill was proud of where she’d made it to in SHIELD and wanted to continue to prove herself. “Not the same as the one that deposited Thor or the ones that get picked up by the station in the desert.”

“Damn.” Fury leaned on the console, studying the map. Three events of this new energy type, three different sites, all far too close to Puente Antiguo and Albuquerque for his comfort. He wasn’t too worried about the latter, security there was tight, but Puente Antiguo was little better than a rest stop on an untraveled road. He looked at the other two standing beside him. “I need options.”

“Surveillance drones.”

“We’ve tried that. Somehow whatever’s coming in on these events, if anything is coming in on these events, is hiding itself.”

“Ground search.”

“High visibility. If aliens are wandering around the southwest, I don’t want people freaking out.”

“They wouldn’t if we used some of our own resources, airlifted in,” Hill pointed out. “Still a lot of desert.”

“Expand the facility at Puente Antiguo, or bring the physicist and her friend to Albuquerque.”

“I don’t think Dr. Foster will go for that one,” Coulson said. “She was pretty adamant about remaining where she was.”

“It’s not just her work on the line here,” Hill replied. “This is part of something bigger. She should accept that.”

“Do you want to try and convince her to see things that way?”

“What’s the latest from her, anyway?” Fury tapped an icon along the side of his display, and his screen shifted. On one side, the glowing, curling wisps of nebulae, points highlighted along its branches. Each one had a data set associated with it. Nine major points, and dozens of smaller, ancillary ones clustered around them. With a flick of his fingers Fury put it up on the big display in front of them.

“It looks like she’s got it,” Hill said. She sounded impressed.

“She’s close.” Coulson tapped the point labeled ASGARD on his display, and the one above them zoomed in. “This is still just a region of space, but it’s a much narrower region than before. She’s been pulling data from the VLA and other telescopes around the world – and above it – and analyzing everything coming out of that area.”

“Anything else we can give her to speed up her search?”
“She’s got as much as we can give, as well as access she technically shouldn’t even have.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do there.” Fury tapped another icon, nested below Jane’s. Thor’s face filled the display. “What about him?”

“You saw the feed, sir.”

“It wasn’t very comforting.” Fury stepped back. “So we’ve got alien boots on the ground, a stubborn astrophysicist close to making the discovery of her career, and a potential demigod without his powers, all in the same region of the country as our most valuable asset that we still haven’t figured out the workings of.”


Fury gave one last, thoughtful look at the image of Thor on the screen. “Fuck-all we can do about any of it right now,” Fury muttered, and turned away from the console. “Let me know what Barton’s got to say when he checks in. I could use some good news.”

*

When Jane was fifteen years old, she saw the movie Contact.

Even then she’d known that what she really wanted wasn’t to be found anywhere on the planet, something she’d had a grasp on since she crawled out of her family’s tent on the beach they were camping on and happened to look up into a perfectly clear sky. It had unnerved her parents a little when at breakfast the next morning she’d announced (at the tender age of seven) that she wanted to study space, but they’d encouraged her, seeing that everything else didn’t make her half as happy as textbooks full of information they couldn’t begin to understand.

At fifteen she’d been about to graduate from high school and had chosen to go to UC Berkeley for her undergrad. As she’d sat in the darkened movie theater watching Dr. Arroway travel among the stars, Jane had known with certainty that that would be her one day. She would see the stars with her own eyes. She had no idea then what way her life would go, or that, at pushing thirty-one, she would be sitting in a former car dealership with headphones on, listening for any pattern in the noise, while an alien (or a Norse god, or both) sat beside her looking almost comical hunched over the laptop pecking at the keys.

Life had a way of surprising you. Jane had learned to be flexible.

When she sat back half an hour later, pausing the feed and sliding the headphones off, Thor sat back with her. He looked a little tired, and Jane leaned against his shoulder while he rested his eyes and she rested her ears.

“You couldn’t again,” she said quietly. She didn’t need to elaborate. It had been nearly a month since Coulson had come and visited, and Thor had gone out to the crater site often since then. He maintained that when the terms of the spell were fulfilled Mjolnir would return to his hand of its own accord, but that didn’t stop him from trying, and she couldn’t blame him for it. His continued silence was enough to tell her she hit the mark, and she took one of his big hands in both of hers.

For a long time, Thor was silent, watching the rain pound against the glass. The storm had rolled in earlier, thunder and lightning making it impossible to do anything but data analysis. They had everything in the lab on surge protectors, but even so, Jane didn’t want to risk any of the equipment. Thor seemed to enjoy the storm anyway, and the couch was comfortable.

“It’s just the storm, probably.” But Jane knew what he meant. Something was coming. Something was about to change.

“Probably. But it carries the scent of magic with it, and none I have met in this realm possess something like this.”

Jane chewed on that for a moment. The line between what she knew was science and what Thor deemed magic became thinner the further they delved into astrophysics and explored the paths the wormholes traveled – the Branches, Thor called them, the branches of Yggdrasil. She looked at the wall they’d covered in pictures – visible-light adjusted, infrared, radio images of swirling hot clouds of gas that could, apparently, also be paths between planetary bodies.

“So you know when magic’s being used?”

Thor stared out at the rain a moment, thinking. “It is more a… a hint, I suppose. A feeling, a sensation. Do you know how it feels when someone is looking at you across a room but your back is turned?”

“Prickly?”

“Yes, that is a good description. It feels prickly.”

She wondered briefly if it was an instinct with people from Asgard – they lived their lives with the presence of magic, there’d be an advantage to know when it was around – but let it go. “Do you know if it’s good or bad? Whatever’s coming, I mean.”

“I do not.” Thor turned his head, resting his chin atop her head. “Loki could tell, if he were here, but he always said it was largely the intent of the user that made these things clear. He and I always disagreed on that.”

“We’ll ask him, when we get you home.”

They lapsed into silence at that. Thor seemed about to say something, several times, but kept it to himself as they got back to work. Jane drew her knees up to her chest, barely listening to the cosmic noise in her ears, eyes unfocused and staring at the screen Thor was watching beside her. Her mind was full of… of things she hadn’t even imagined, when she’d walked across the stage after earning her doctorate. Magic, gods, wormholes from one planet to another or from one dimension pop in her headphones and a spike in Thor’s screen. It took Jane a moment to realize what she’d seen, but when she did, she jolted upright.

“Hold on, girl, she told herself. One time doesn’t mean anything. You have the data here – look at it. Erik had told her the same thing, often, when something had happened and she’d gotten excited. It was fine to be excited, he’d always said. It was what drove people on to great things. But excitement without evidence could turn into something that ruined your career.

“Thor,” she said slowly, nudging his shoulder. “I need you to go back to this time mark…”

She reached for the keyboard that controlled the other screen, and pressed one side of her headphones to her ear as she went back to the moment the event had registered. There it was again – a pop, the spike on Thor’s screen, the telemetry from the event. Jane halted the replay.

“Write down what those coordinates are,” she said, scrawling her own on a scrap of paper.

Thor knew her science voice well, and though he was clearly trying to remain calm, there was something in his eyes, some light and certainty that hadn’t been there before. “Jane?”
“Write them down, and then I want you to cue up these files…” she rattled off the ones she wanted, fingers flying across her own keys as she did the same for the bank of event logs, then the sound files for the same dates and times. “I think…”

She trailed off, playing the events they’d registered over a month ago, the ones they thought were Asgard-Jotunheim trips. The spike wasn’t as big, the pop not as loud, but when she knew what she was listening for she could pick it out of the background noise. Each instance, the time mark was the same as the peak of an event.

The last one Jane listened to was the event that brought Thor here. It was there too, loud and clear.

“Do you think…?”

Jane looked at Thor and saw that light again, and knew that it was hope. It had always been there, but now it was beginning to blaze high. She couldn’t keep the grin off her face then, and it spread out as brilliant as the night sky.

“I think we might be on to something,” she said, and kissed him.

* 

Jane compiled all the data and sent it to Erik and a few other colleagues she trusted back at Culver, asking them to confirm her results. After some consideration she sent it to her contact at SHIELD too; they’d wanted to be kept apprised of her progress, and as they had in fact returned her equipment and given her a living stipend, she could do this in the name of professionalism. Whatever she thought about the suits, she wouldn’t begrudge her fellow scientists.

Jane turned it over in her mind, trying to find reasons why what she was hearing and seeing could be false. She pulled up data from observatories around the world, comparing what was received at points far away to what she had from her own instruments and the data she’d made the discovery with. For those who were monitoring that quadrant of the sky that included the coordinates she thought Asgard to be at, the pop registered, as did the spike – a slight increase in visible light and a huge spike in many other forms of energy output.

Jane made sure to stress this to Thor – that nothing was certain, that until she got confirmation from those she’d emailed, she couldn’t say with certainty she’d found his home.

Darcy took it as word of God, though, and now Jane wrapped her fingers around her mug of coffee, looking at the violently blue sticky arrow that now pointed at a specific cluster of stars and nebulous gases. The coordinates, written in Darcy’s bold hand, marked the end of months of searching. She’d had the feeling that something big was coming. Was this it?

* 

Nick Fury wondered if he’d ever gotten a full night of sleep since becoming director of SHIELD. He couldn’t remember, but he would have laid money that he hadn’t slept more than a few hours at a time on any given night. The downside of running an operation that specialized in the kinds of things that others couldn’t handle, he guessed, but sometimes he wished that alerts and updates didn’t always come right as he’d laid his head down on the pillow.

“What is it, Coulson?” he asked, sitting up and reaching for his eyepatch.

“An update from one of the lead astrophysicists at the Albuquerque headquarters, sir.” Coulson’s suit wasn’t rumpled, his shirt and tie neatly pressed as always. The man never looked ruffled. It was creepy. “He’s received data from Dr. Foster regarding her work.”
That woke him up the rest of the way. Sliding the patch into place, Fury stood. “Fill me in.”

They left the crash room and made their way through the corridors. At this hour the helicarrier ran on a skeleton crew. *Something we’ll have to change,* Fury thought. *The bad guys don’t limit their operations to daytime hours.*

“Two days ago, Dr. Costas received several files from Dr. Foster with a request to examine specific time marks. Dr. Costas did so – several times, with his findings being confirmed by several other members of his team – and came back with something very interesting.”

“Small words here, Coulson.”

“Don’t worry, sir, I’ve translated it already.” Coulson flipped back the top of the folder, examining it as they walked onto the command deck. “It seems there’s a correspondence between the peak of these events Dr. Foster’s been monitoring and energy spectra from a certain point in the sky.” He slid a thumb drive into a slot on the wall and one of the screens lit up, showing a star field with one point of light circled in blue. “We’ve checked it ourselves here, too, as have some of Dr. Foster’s colleagues.”

“She sent it outside?” Fury scowled; Dr. Foster was not their only option here, but Dr. Selvig didn’t have the kind of firsthand knowledge that she did, and he’d returned to Culver before SHIELD had gotten all this clamped down tight.

“She was rather irate that I would question her practices.” Coulson was choosing his words delicately here, and Fury suspected that ‘rather irate’ was the polite way of putting Dr. Foster’s mood. “She wanted unbiased confirmation.”

“Nothing we can do about it now.” He picked up his tablet off the desk and it lit up when he pressed his thumb to the biometrics box. Data scrolled across the tablet when he selected Dr. Foster’s icon. “Did she get what she wanted?”

“Yes.” Fury looked up sharply, and Coulson met his gaze. “Based on Dr. Costas’ tests and the responses we’ve intercepted from the others she sent it to, the data from Dr. Foster indicates that she has found a point of origin for the trips designated as being from Asgard to other... realms.”

“Then we need to get her to Albuquerque.”

“She won’t like that.”

“I don’t really care at this point.” Fury was tapping buttons on the tablet, sending out automated commands. “Whatever’s coming in on those events aren’t the only things on this planet that would kill to get what Dr. Foster knows. And knowing her, she’s kept very complete notes. They wouldn’t even need her. Both her and her research will be safer in Albuquerque.”

Coulson was quiet, thinking as Fury continued to set things in motion. “You want her there to work on the device.”

“Her, yes. And Thor. Between a brilliant astrophysicist and a god, something’s bound to happen.”

“I’ll fly out in—“

“No, we’re leaving now.”

“We?”
Fury smiled thinly, shrugging into his long coat. “I think it’s time I paid a visit to Puente Antiguo.”

* 

Jane’s reaction upon seeing the convoy of vehicles rolling into the lot of the dealership was immediate and strong.

“Hell no,” she snapped, getting up from where she’d been poring over the correspondence she’d been getting from those she’d trusted with the data. “Darcy, do you have your taser handy?”

“Uh—“

“Because I am not letting them in here. Over my dead body.”

“They don’t look threatening this time. Jane—“ Darcy swung her legs off the arm of the chair she’d been sprawled across, honestly concerned for the safety of the suits getting out of the lead car. She tapped Thor’s arm as she passed him.

“Not saying you’ll need to, big fella, but get ready to grab Jane and hold her back if she goes for the throat on any of these guys,” she told him. Thor looked appropriately alarmed, and the two of them trailed after Jane as she stormed out the front doors. Coulson was there, along with two other men she’d never seen before.

“…not letting you take my research!” she was shouting. “I sent it to your people as a courtesy, a gesture of professionalism, not so you and your lackeys—“

“Never been a lackey before,” one of the two new guys muttered to Coulson. Darcy took a good long look at the way Not-A-Lackey’s biceps moved under the black UnderArmour shirt he was wearing. They weren’t gonna win against Thor’s for sheer size, but not bad to look at at all. Maybe it was wrong to check out the enemy, but Jane wasn’t about to notice. Jane was almost literally hopping mad anyway.

“—have just made the discovery of the century, of my own career, and so help me, if you take it away from me—“

“We don’t want to do that, Dr. Foster,” the black-coated man said. “Just the opposite. We want you to come help us with something that your work has now made possible.”

That did make Jane stop and shut her mouth a moment, but Darcy marked the way her eyes narrowed, and stayed on guard. Jane could fly off at any moment when she was like this.

“How?”

“By working with us on something that is beyond anything you could have imagined.”

“I’ve located the home of an alien race,” Jane shot back. “I can imagine a lot right now.”

“Fair enough.” The man shifted his eyes (eye? Darcy never knew how to address one-eyed people) to Thor, standing in easy snatching distance of Jane. He probably didn’t need to be standing so close – for all that he was a really big guy he was amazingly fast – but Darcy understood he probably felt the need to protect his mate, or something, even though Jane looked like she could claw this guy’s remaining eye out with her blunt-cut nails any day.

But the man was talking again. “So you’re Thor,” he said. “Son of Odin.” To Darcy’s surprise, the man inclined his head slightly in a gesture of respect, which was probably a good idea when talking
to aliens in a diplomatic context. “Glad to finally meet you.”

“I am.” Thor returned the nod in a very formal, regal way that probably shouldn’t have surprised Darcy. Thor was royalty, after all. “Well met,” he said warily. “Though I do not know your own name.”

“Which is kinda rude,” Darcy muttered, and only realized she’d said it out loud when everyone turned to look at her. At that point the only course of action was to cross her arms and look defiant, because she sure as hell wasn’t going to let on that she was terrified.

“I’m Director Nick Fury, of SHIELD.” He turned back to Jane. “Can we talk inside, doctor? This will be interesting to both of you, but I don’t want to talk about it out here.”

Thor touched Jane’s shoulder and she turned to look at him. Something unspoken passed between them, and Darcy was suddenly, inexplicably jealous. They didn’t even need words to understand each other, when she was always tripping up on her own.

Jane seemed to ease up a bit. “Come on in,” she said, a little stiffly. “But just you and Agent Coulson. I won’t have all these people crowding in and touching everything.” Darcy followed them all inside after one last curious look back at all the cars and vans. What were they doing here if they weren’t going to snatch away Jane’s stuff again?

When she came in to where everyone was sitting down, Fury gave her a look. Coulson appeared out of nowhere right as he was about to speak and handed them both cups of coffee (he had put Darcy’s in her favorite mug, too).

“Miss Lewis is cleared, sir,” he said. “Even if she weren’t, I don’t know that we could stop her from staying.”

“Thanks, g-man,” she said, and pulled over another chair to sit at Jane’s side. “Appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“It’s imperative that we don’t waste time.” Coulson brought coffee for Jane and Thor as well, then sat and pulled a tablet out of his briefcase. No crumpled notepad this time. “Now that you’ve solved the question of where Asgard is, we need you to work out how to get there.”

Jane stared at him. “Do you have an appreciably higher level of spaceflight technology?” she asked. “And the capability of faster-than-light travel? Because the only way you’ll get to where it seems that Asgard is, other than the means that Thor’s described to us several times now, is with that. And as far as I know—“

“But that’s just it, doctor,” Fury said. “You don’t know.”

“We cannot if you do not make yourself plain,” Thor said, and Darcy gripped her mug a little tighter than necessary. She had seen Thor angry just once in the months he’d been here, and it was not an experience she wanted to see repeated here. But he was watching Fury and Coulson very carefully, brows drawn together. Though Thor came off like a giant retriever puppy most of the time, she couldn’t forget that he had biceps the size of her head and could probably crush bone with them, even minus any godly strength bonuses. “I tire of these games, and Jane tires of them. If time is as short as you say, say what you mean and what you want.”

Fury and Coulson exchanged a look – similar to the one that Jane and Thor had exchanged, though with a different twist, obviously – and Fury turned his gaze back on the two of them. “We have an artifact that the two of you might find particularly interesting,” he said at last. “Especially you, Thor.
You’d find it very interesting indeed.”

They talked for over an hour – Jane pulling out her notebook and scribbling in it. Thor remembered the tesseract, certainly, but not with much clarity. It had been taken from the vault when he was very little, he said. By the time his memories were clear and fully formed it had been gone for years, lost.

“I don’t get it,” Darcy said, perched on the edge of her chair. “You’ve got what’s his name, that guy who can see, like, everything—“

“Heimdall.”

“—why couldn’t he just see where this thing was?”

“Magic is a strange thing.” Thor passed a hand over his face, resting his chin in it briefly. “It sometimes has a will of its own.” He looked over at Fury and Coulson. “What is it you are asking of us?”

“Come with us to Albuquerque,” Fury said. “We need your knowledge of Asgard technology to understand this thing, Thor. And we need your expertise to use it, Dr. Foster.”

“Are we even sure that this thing should be used?” Darcy asked, then made a face when everyone looked at her again. “I can be here. I can ask questions, too. Just because I don’t have half the alphabet after my name yet doesn’t mean anything.”

“It is a fair question, Darcy,” Thor said. “The stories around the tesseract say that it is a thing of great power – the kind of power that does what it wants.”

“It’s a cube,” Fury said.

“It is magical. It may work in one way one day, and another the next.”

“It was used to power Hydra’s bases and technology for years, in the same way.”

“The tesseract responds to people of great power, or those who have strong wills, as do most magical things. I could not tell you more than that. I never had a mind for these things.”

He did not mention his brother, but by the way Jane curled her fingers around his hand as she scribbled in her notebook with the other was all that Darcy needed to know. She could sometimes hear them talking quietly – of Asgard, of Thor, of Jane’s childhood, of her work – and despite being nosy as all get-out, felt like she was intruding then.

“We need it to work,” Fury said. “We need to find a way to your home, Thor.”

“But I cannot return until I reclaim Mjolnir – if then, if my presence in Asgard will not nullify the treaty with Jotunheim. Such were the terms.”

“Then you don’t have to go. But if I were you, I’d want to see my home.”

“Why?” Jane asked, putting her pen down. “Why do you want to go to Asgard so badly?”

She was looking at them closely, and so was Thor, and Darcy couldn’t blame them. A society like Asgard, a race like Thor’s… she could name at least twenty ways to abuse any power they gained off the top of her head. But looking at Fury’s face, and the way something about it suddenly became concerned – really, truly concerned – made her pause and give him the benefit of the doubt. The guy seemed like he was stone most of the time. Whatever worried him worried Darcy a lot more.
We’ve been tracking events,” he said. “Like the ones you have, Jane, but different at the same time. Once we knew what we were looking for – using your data – we realized what was going on, that someone else was coming through.”

“Someone has been traveling in a way that is not the Bifrost?”

“Sounds like it,” Jane murmured. “Do you know of anything else?”

“Magic, again,” Thor said. “Each realm has its own way… had their own, in the case of Jotunheim, but there are paths connecting all realms to each other, though they are much less powerful than the Bifrost, and link a realm and its attendant outposts. Regardless, it bodes ill. Most of the realms possessed of this and with good intentions would have made contact by now.”

“Do you see why we need you both in Albuquerque?” Fury considered Thor for a long moment. “I know you probably don’t want to leave your hammer out there, but it’s of the utmost importance that you go with Dr. Foster.”

They were all quiet for a moment, indecision growing large on Jane and Thor’s faces. Darcy couldn’t take it after a minute of silence. Jane was her best friend, her mentor, and Thor – he was like some goofy combination of older brother, affable jock friend, and parent. Jane loved him, and Jane was the whole reason Darcy was out here in Bumfuck, New Mexico, in the first place.

“Look, I know you keep saying time is short and all,” she said, leaning forward, “But this is a pretty tall order. I think we’re gonna need to have some time to think about it.”

Fury and Coulson exchanged another look, but both stood. A moment later, Jane and Thor did too, followed by Darcy. “Of course. But not too long – if we’re going to leave, we need to do it today, or tomorrow at the latest.”

They showed themselves out, though they didn’t get back into their cars; rather it seemed that the whole contingent of them drifted off in the direction of Izzy’s, which would probably make her very happy. Darcy sat again and looked at her friends, then at her hands, twisting them nervously in front of her.

“Thank you, Darcy,” Jane said quietly.

She spread her hands. “Hey, no big. I just told the scariest man alive to go away and let us think without his eye staring at us all judgmental. Is that what it was like for you, Thor? Because I mean, Odin only has the one eye, and like, from what you’ve said he’s pretty terrifying, do you think that he and this Fury guy would get along, because I think they’d get along——

“Darcy. Deep breath.”

“You did well, Darcy,” Thor said, going over and putting a hand on her shoulder. “We do need time to consider this. You have far more skill at diplomacy than I do.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked, but smiled up at him. “I’m just too stupid to know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“You’re not stupid,” Jane said, running a hand through her hair as she went over to refill their mugs. Darcy let herself puff up a little. If someone with a brain the size of a planet told her she wasn’t stupid, she’d take it to heart.

“So what do you think?” she asked Thor. “I mean, everything you have is here. Myuh-mew—don’t look at me like that, Jane, it’s pretty much unpronounceable—the place where you landed, that’s all
around Puente Antiguo. Albuquerque’s hundreds of miles away.”

“Mjolnir will find me, if it comes to that,” Thor said, but he was thoughtful. “These beings he speaks of, these ones who hide themselves away, that concerns me. I can think of no creatures in the realms that I have faced that take such care. Most denizens of the lower realms want to make their presence known sometime.”

“Maybe they’re waiting for something,” Jane said. “Or looking for something. Maybe this tesseract thing.”

“It’s not like SHIELD is gonna put up signs pointing toward where they’re keeping it.”

“They will find it, if that is what they are looking for.” Thor scowled. “There are too many questions here.”

“And I don’t think Fury was lying when he said they didn’t know anything about these alien invaders from outer space,” Darcy put in. She watched Jane, though. Where Jane went, she and Thor would go too, and she’d seen the spark of interest in those eyes when Fury had talked about needing her work and her expertise to get things moving between Asgard and Midgard; the last time that spark had appeared they’d all gone on this latest research bender. But she wouldn’t rush into this.

“I don’t know,” Jane said, tracing the rim of her mug with her fingertip. “I need to think.”

Darcy tried to ignore the flutter of nerves in her stomach as the two of them climbed up to the roof. Not even getting on Tumblr and looking through the baby bunnies tag helped out, so finally she put her laptop away and pulled one of her thumbed-through books of Norse mythology toward her. She’d had to return the children’s book back to the library, but Amazon was a wonderful place, and she not only had that one, but a variety of translations of the Eddas and some other scholarly ones. The children’s book automatically fell open to the page on Thor. Never without his mighty hammer, it said. Ha.

Hours later, Jane and Thor came back down, and Darcy set her book aside as they sat down. It had grown dark, and the SHIELD guys had moved their cars and gone to bunk down in the one hotel in town, so Darcy could see the horizon still glowing a lighter blue with the last sunlight.

“I’ve made up my mind,” Jane said. “I’m going to go, and Thor has agreed to come with me. As much as I still don’t completely trust SHIELD for what they did… it’s no good holding on to things that happened months ago, and they’ve kept their word since we agreed to help them. They could have just come in here and taken our things – my research – and left again, but they want to enlist our help. I have to respect that. All that being said…” Jane took a deep breath. “I want you to make your own decision, Darcy. You didn’t sign up for any of this when you took this internship, and I feel like I’ve put you through too much sometimes. The semester’s almost up, and if you want to just stay here for the last few weeks of it or if you want to go back to Culver or go home, I’ll understand and I’ll sign off on your credits. I couldn’t blame you for wanting to get out.”

Darcy stared at Jane – sitting there biting her lip because her damn lab assistant might leave, Thor beside her looking like he carried the whole damn world on his shoulders – and then snorted. “Are you kidding?” she said. “You’d forget to eat if I didn’t shove food under your nose. Face it, you totally need me around.”

Jane looked sheepish. “Sadly, I’m pretty sure you’re right,” she mumbled.

“Of course I’m right. And who’s going to keep an eye on Thor so he doesn’t go off and do something weird that’ll get him smacked down here? You’ll be too busy calculating the airspeed
velocity of swallows in space, or whatever. Besides, I’m not going to pass up the opportunity to visit an alien planet. No way.” She crossed her arms. “Sorry, you’re stuck with me.”

The brilliant smile that Jane turned on her made Darcy grin too. “I’m glad to hear it. I really don’t know what I’d do without you, Darcy.”

“You’d crumble up and blow away in the wind.” She stood up and marched over to the door. “I’m going to go pack. You guys deal with Mr. Terrifying, I’m all tapped out for the day on talking to intimidating guys who could snap me in half.”

When she was alone in her apartment, though, Darcy leaned back against the door and took a deep, shuddering breath. What the hell was she getting herself into now?

*

The strange jet hovered a moment, then lowered to the tarmac with hardly a bump. Her battered leather pack in her hands, Jane looked out the window nearest her and saw a broad airfield surrounded by an even broader expanse of red desert dirt. Ahead of them were squat, boxy buildings painted matte gray. There were no symbols, no lettering on the buildings to let anyone know who or what was here, but it had such a military feel to it that she wasn’t sure how anyone could mistake it for that kind of an installation.

Here I spent months resisting them, she thought. And now all three of us are walking right in. I hope we don’t regret it.

She turned and peered down the length of the jet to where her equipment had been neatly loaded, tied down six ways to Sunday so it didn’t shift in flight. The agents had been extraordinarily efficient in getting things loaded - she supposed they had practice – and now as they taxied in a little closer and the engines began winding down, the cargo doors opened and a swarm of new agents came on to start unloading things. Fury disappeared down the ramp, already talking into his earpiece in a low voice.

“Welcome to SHIELD’s Albuquerque facility,” Coulson said, rising from his seat. “Watch your step.”

“Very Area 51,” Darcy said, hands shoved into the pockets of her coat. “I approve.” Coulson gave her a level look.

“Careful with that,” Jane said as two agents passed her. “I’d like to stay out here and supervise this.”

“I’m afraid you need to be given the tour and then briefed,” Coulson said as the four of them walked down the ramp. “I assure you that our agents are used to handling extremely delicate equipment, and will treat yours with care. But there’s a lot to do, and we’re short on time, so if you’ll all follow me…”

Jane bristled – she didn’t trust these agents to know a particle detector from a Frisbee – but Coulson was already walking toward the nearest building, and so she followed along with Thor and Darcy at her sides.

Inside the building each one of them had their fingerprints, retina scans, and picture taken, an ID badge appearing in a slot below the camera a moment later. It was thin, clear plastic; if Jane tilted it a little she could see translucent circuitry running through it.

“Wear these at all times you’re in any SHIELD base,” Coulson instructed, pulling his own out of a pocket and clipping it to his lapel. “All three of you have the highest level of clearance we can give
and Security will know your faces, but it’s better to just wear the badge. Things can get sticky when
you don’t.” They all clipped on their badges, and followed him through a set of metal doors and
down a long hallway that ended in a bank of elevators. Thor was initially wary of getting into what
he saw as a metal box, but became greatly amused when it began descending, and when the doors
opened again all three of them fell silent in amazement.

Before them was a wall of picture windows, looking out onto a large, concrete-walled room. On one
side, a raised platform, with thick black wires running from it to some kind of circular device directly
across the room. There was a hole in the middle that seemed to have brackets meant to hold
something, but at the moment they were empty.

“This is what we like to call the transit center,” Coulson said. “Little joke that the techs came up
with.”

“What is that thing?” Jane murmured.

“Magic,” Thor said. Jane looked down, and saw that all the little blond hairs on his arms were
standing up.

“It’s just some equipment,” she replied.

Coulson showed them around the facility – most of which, he explained, was underground. The last
stop was a very bright, very clean room, and it was there that the tesseract was kept. The thing
glowed electric blue, the light seeming to shift oddly within it, and Jane had to tear her eyes away
when she felt herself becoming enthralled. Beside her, the hairs were standing up on Thor’s arms
again. Jane smoothed her hands over her sleeves, but her neck prickled.

“Can we go?” Darcy said plaintively after a minute. “That thing gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“That’s what you’ll be working with,” Coulson said, but he led them back out of the hallway. “Don’t
worry, Miss Lewis. It’s unsettling to all of us.”

Back in the observation hallway, Fury and the third man who had been with them in Puente Antiguo
were waiting. “This is Agent Clint Barton,” Fury said. “He’s been assigned as security detail to you
three when you work with the cube.”

They all shook hands (Thor still doing so awkwardly and carefully so as to refrain from crushing
bones). “Looks like I get my chance to be a lackey after all,” he said.

“Someone’s gotta do it,” Darcy told him knowingly.

“My equipment—“ Jane began, but Coulson raised a hand.

“It’s all safe in your new lab,” he said. “Just waiting for you to get your things in order and get
started.”


“When can we start?” she asked.
Hello everyone! Thank you all for reading or coming back to read.

Couple notes: From here on out the only spoilers from Avengers this fic will have will have to do with the tesseract and details about it, among other small things like that. I don't intend to have the direction of the story change or anything like that. Just a heads-up though in case you still want to avoid those.

Secondly, tiger-mother over on Tumblr has done a little bit of fanart that sent me into a fit of glee when I saw it. It's kind of like you read my mind in regards to one thing, but. Well. Thank you again, so much!

*phase transition:* the transformation of a thermodynamic system from one phase or state of matter to another.

As the last flashes of light from the Bifrost disappeared from his eyes, Loki turned on his heel and made his way back inside. The nobles had started muttering; those with fewer scruples, or perhaps less intelligence, were quietly mocking that their queen dared ride at the head of the column. He ignored them. *Have a little more faith in my skills,* she had said, and Loki was trying, but his mind spun out a dozen different scenarios in as many seconds, and none of them ended well. It was always easier for him to see the darker outcomes than the ones where things worked out.

The day seemed to drag on after that, the mists burning away but slowly, though they were gone by the time most of the rest of the palace was awake and breakfasting. Loki did not go down to them and canceled all he had had planned for the day in favor of locking himself in his study. It was unbecoming of a king, he knew, but he doubted that anyone would fault him. The whole city was on edge, apprehension and worry laying like a heavy blanket over everything, stifling laughter and making conversations subdued and short. Training was canceled for the new recruits, and those who decided to take up arms and practice anyway were quieter and did not last long, cutting their training short to sit in the shade of the great columns around the yards.

Loki heard their shouts from where he stood far up above, watching the faint outline of the Observatory at the edge of the Realm. He could ask Heimdall how they fared – the gatekeeper was more than likely keeping at least one eye on matters – but refrained. He and Sif had not trusted each other as they had vowed they would and that had to change, but it was a difficult path to walk for someone used to trusting only himself. In any case, he and Heimdall had never quite gotten along, king or kin or otherwise.

But he could not concentrate. The runes ran together in his eyes and the spells he attempted from the scroll he was reading fizzled out, and finally he set it aside out of frustration and went to stand by the balcony until the sky began to darken and he could not avoid his duties anymore. Keeping his battle garb on, he went down to dinner but even then he was distracted, and most of the guests gave him a wide berth unless he came to talk to them. Sleep that night came slowly and was unsatisfying when it arrived.

The mood the next morning had become a little less restrained, and Loki was speaking with some
visitors from Vanaheim about their actions to help displaced refugees when there were shouts in the hall and the clatter of boots and armor in the doorway, voices rising and falling in excitement the closer they got.

“What is that noise?” he heard one of the nobles standing nearby mutter, and turned to see.

Sif stalked (there could be no other word for it, her strides too long and too fluid for it to be described otherwise) into the room. She looked neither left nor right at the nobles horrified by her appearance and lack of decorum, but locked eyes with him, and Loki could not look away. How could he, when war itself was prowling toward him, death in her eyes and covered boot to brow with blood and gore and grime?

She had clearly just come from the Observatory, for her golden shield was still on her arm. Behind her were the other warriors of Asgard, not the Einherjar but those who had blood oaths writ upon the scrolls of Vár. Loki had eyes only for her though, as she walked without hesitance up to him and the nobles – the same ones who had scoffed at her behind their hands when she had left that morning, the sunlight sparkling on the dragon’s wings of her helm. Hogun carried it now, tucked under his arm, the polished surface scraped and grimy as the rest of her. He and the rest of the sworn warriors of Asgard hung back now, though, letting their warrior queen advance alone. His warrior queen, even estranged as they were right now.

“Sif,” Loki said, keeping his voice light. “So you have returned. We were beginning to grow concerned.”

She halted, a few paces away from him; Loki could see her eyes flick momentarily to the nobles behind him, then focus back on him. Then with a sneer, she reached into a sack slung across her back and threw the head of what could only be a fire giant – Torg – at his feet. The hideous thing oozed blood from its stump of a neck, and though there were gasps and cries of disgust throughout the chamber, Loki only looked at it, nonplussed. Sif just raised her eyebrow at him and her lips curled further into a savage grin.

“I take it you had little trouble with him, then?” he asked. Sif’s eyes practically threw off sparks.

“You should make better enemies, husband,” she said, in a husky voice. “Or at least set me against one worthy to cross blades with.”

Nobody moved, none so much as breathed. Then Loki made a banishing gesture with one hand, glancing around to make sure everyone got the message and obeyed it. “Clean this up,” he said, toeing the ugly thing. “And leave, all of you.”

Sif tilted her chin up defiantly, and he waited until people had filtered away from them before speaking to her quietly. “Sif, are you—“

“I told you to have more faith in my skills.” Sif seemed to sway a moment – probably the rush she had from the battle fading, he thought – but steadied herself. “Torg presented a challenge, but he underestimated me.”

“A fatal mistake that too many have made, and now one more besides.” He could see claw marks, cuts dragged deep across her bare arms, a scrape on one cheek and another cut on the other and probably more that he couldn’t see, but she did not seem to feel them herself. “I’ll expect to hear what happened.”

“I know the Allfather impressed the value of patience upon you,” she said, stepping back still facing him as servants came over to gingerly roll the decapitated giant’s head back into its sack and carry it
away. “You’ll have it, Loki.”

“It seems we’ve all but secured victory already,” he called after her. Sif turned, but not before he could see the very superior smirk on her face as she did. For the first time since their trip to Jotunheim, Loki could smile at her unguardedly, even if it was at her back. When she was gone, though, he considered the smear of gore across the stone at his feet.

What am I going to do with a fire giant’s head? he thought curiously.

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When the head was taken care of and the appropriate words said to soothe the ruffled nobility, Loki made his way down to the courtyard. The force that had gone out to meet Torg’s had been sizeable, and though they had left in a haze of magic and glory, their return was far more drawn-out. Heimdall took them in groups so that the courtyard did not get crowded with wounded horses and men to move around, and while triage was going on where the battle had taken place, there was still plenty of motion and activity as the grievously wounded were stabilized by Eir and her retinue of helpers.

Edwik was standing on the stone steps leading down to the courtyard, up above the crowds. There were others clustered around; nobles, other soldiers who hadn’t gone out, curious onlookers from the city. Those nearby bowed, and Loki nodded at them before turning to the older warrior.

“It sounds like it was bloody,” he said. Edwik gave him a very level look.

“Battle’s bloody, my king. We’re lucky to have so many returning home to us.” He lifted his chin. “It’s in no small part thanks to your lady, you know.”

Loki followed his movement. Sif was standing in the thick of things – when wasn’t she in the middle of everything, really, but she usually wasn’t wounded and exhausted – directing her soldiers. She hadn’t bothered to change out of her scuffed and blood-splattered armor yet. Still beautiful, no mistake, but he had seen her not a few hours past. She ought to have been in the healing rooms by now.

“She has long since earned her place as one of Asgard’s foremost warriors,” he said. “It’s unsurprising that she was the one to bring down their general.”

“This general. Doubtless there are a hundred more just waiting for the chance to be lifted up.”

Loki clenched a hand into a fist. “That’s a thing that is hardly unique to the darker Realms,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me.”

The soldiers parted around him as he descended the stone steps and made his way across the courtyard that was still just beginning to empty of soldiers and horses. Normally Loki would have stopped to talk to those who could do so or who wanted to, but right now, he was focused on getting to Sif.

When he reached her she was helping a warrior twice her size off his horse. He had the head of a spear embedded in his abdomen still, and Sif helped keep him steady as two of Eir’s journeyman healers got his feet under him and took him off to the healing room as fast as they could go. “Sif,” he said, hesitating a moment before putting a hand on her arm. “You’ve done all you can. You need the healing rooms yourself.”

Sif shook her head. The gore and blood in her hair had dried her ponytail into stiff sections, and they pattered against the metal of her armor as her hair moved. “This group has only just arrived,” she replied, surveying the men and horses being moved around. “There, on your feet, Jon,” she said with
surprising gentleness, helping one of the newer recruits up. He was ashen, but brightened a little when he saw who it was helping him up. “They are the last. I won’t leave until I’ve seen those under my command cared for.”

“Eir has her healers for that.”

“Healers whose hands are full right now. I am not as grievously injured as some here.” Sif directed a stableboy with three prancing chargers in hand to tether them for now and get to work on the horses already standing in the lines waiting to be untacked and checked over, bent to pick up someone’s fallen knife – and swayed dangerously, would have fallen if Loki hadn’t put out a hand and grasped her arm to pull her back upright again. She hissed in pain, and when Loki looked at his palm, he saw a smear of fresh blood across it.

“You’ve done your duty to your soldiers,” he said, settling his hand on her vambrace so as not to further aggravate her wounds. It was a simple thing to keep his voice level; even if Sif would not heed him as her friend and husband, she would listen to her king. “You cannot lead them if you can barely stand by yourself.”

The look she gave him made Loki think that she had seen his play, knew what he was doing and knew that she was being manipulated more than a little, but thankfully she took one last look around and nodded, though her chin tilted up in defiance.

“I am not so fragile that I can’t walk by myself, Loki,” she hissed at him as they threaded their way through the crowd toward the healers.

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“I am not so fragile that I can’t walk by myself, Loki,” she hissed at him as they threaded their way through the crowd toward the healers. He let go of her arm obligingly.

“Did I say that?”

“You seem to think it.”

“You’re exhausted and covered in wounds. Am I supposed to simply ignore that?”

“I have come back with worse injuries before, and you never seemed to bat an eye.”

I thought I couldn’t. “Be that as it may. Ah, healer—“

“It’s about time you came here, Lady Sif,” the master healer said as she saw them walking up. “I’ve been wondering if you’d work yourself into a stupor.”

“I don’t need to stay in the healing rooms,” Sif said. “Just a moment of rest and whatever treatment you—“

“You need to have your wounds cleaned before whatever foul taint was on the weapons of your foes sinks into your flesh and festers. The lot of you tangling with trolls and goblins and wargs and who knows what else…” Sif might have been queen and leader of the forces of Asgard besides, but even queens weren’t above getting interrupted by healers when it came to their craft. But even the master healer wasn’t callous; when she saw Sif looking back at the soldiers still waiting, she smiled.

“You’ve given these men more than what they need to get healing and get ready for the next battle. It’s time you tended yourself.”

“And I thought I was the one gifted with words,” Loki mused, accompanied by one of his more brilliant smiles. The healer smiled pleasantly at him. “Please, tie her down if necessary.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Sif muttered.

“I may know a spell—“
Before Sif could voice whatever retort was about to bubble up out of her throat the healer put a hand firmly on her back and began pushing her toward the steps and the enchanted platform that took the wounded up to the proper level; more than a little amused, Loki followed them. “That won’t be necessary. Lady Eir’s been waiting to get her hands on you, my lady. It’s off to the healing rooms straightaway.”

She stared beadily after Sif as the platform rose into the air, and then looked up at Loki. “Lady Eir will see her after she completes whatever she’s working on presently. If you wished to have dinner there with her, I am certain it wouldn’t be detrimental to her healing process.”

“Thank you. I’ll leave such things up to Eir, of course.”

“Of course, my king.”

The healer left to go treat one of the other soldiers, and Loki stood there a moment, looking round the courtyard. Bloody men, bloody horses, the stench of death and sweat and the slight tang of magic hung in the air. Noisome, disgusting, visceral – he had read hundreds of accounts of battle in books, dissected them as a scholar, but even the most vivid and poetic could not capture the brutal reality of it, and this was only the aftermath of one battle with the forces of a foe the likes of which had not been seen in almost long enough for the name itself to become myth.

One war avoided, only to be launched into another far worse, he thought. Wouldn’t the Allfather be proud of me?

But he couldn’t afford to let his thoughts linger. Loki turned on his heel and pulled the shadows around him, reappearing in his study and going straight over to his desk. There was much and more to do, and quickly, now that things were in motion.

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The fires of Muspelheim turned the air of the realm into a noxious, near-palpable miasma that seared the lungs of even those who were denizens of the realm itself. The mortals spoke of a place of hellfire and brimstone, sulfur and ash; Muspelheim was the reality of every such legend that had ever been told since the beginning, and while some had said that at least its fires were warmer than the icy wastes of Jotunheim, the being that ruled over it was darker, more brutal than the most bloodthirsty Jotunn.

Which was why the fire giant kneeling before Surtur now had to force a tremor down; she had labored long in Surtur’s court before being bought by Asgardian spies, who considered her valuable because of her position and her knowledge of the court of the fiery one. You did not show weakness in front of him, though he knew it was there anyway. But showing it was certain death, though if the news one brought was bad enough, that was an inevitable fate as well. This news certainly seemed to qualify.

“The general Torg is dead, my lord,” Raxes reported. “Our forces at the forge of Kronar have been routed. Some escaped back to be transported here and make their reports, but most have either been captured or killed.”

She did not look up at the giant figure standing before the stone table. Surtur seemed to be running his clawed fingers over something – Raxes could hear the ring of claw on… some substance, stone or metal or both – but she dared not raise her eyes. It could well mean death for her if she did so, and then Surtur would not know all the news and would be angry anyway.

“One of the garrison they had stationed to watch the forge themselves escaped back to Asgard, I am
told,” Surtur mused. “The leader of our raiding party was sloppy, overzealous. Is he among the
dead?”

“He is.”

“A pity. I would have liked to kill him myself for his incompetence.” A pause. “Continue.”

“That was the leader of our raiding party. He was sloppy, overzealous.”

“So he was. The dragon queen – so named for her helm, is it not so?”

“It is so, my lord. They also call her the warrior queen.”

“Whoever chose her to pair that trickster they put on the throne was wise. I heard of – Sif, yes? –
even here, where news from the other Realms comes but slowly. It will take more than the likes of
Torg to stop her, I think. But she is still only Asgardian, and still only a woman. She may play at
being a warrior and a general but she will ultimately be ill-suited to the task.”

Unsure of what to say, Raxes simply bowed her head. “It is as you say, my lord.”

“And what of the other thing?”

“We were unable to procure any items from Kronar’s forge—“

“No, no.” Surtur made a gesture with a giant hand, and Raxes bowed her head again hurriedly. “The
thing on Midgard. Odin’s lost treasure.”

“The tesseract.” Raxes held in a sigh of relief that she had not miscalculated and reported what Surtur
did not want to hear. “The forces we have sent to Midgard to retrieve it are in place in the general
region we believe it to be in. Each party has at least one sorcerer capable of detecting its energy.
When it is activated, they will know, and they will go find it and bring it to you.”

“Good. I do enjoy having some capable individuals around me. The tesseract is the true prize, the
one thing in these Realms worth fighting for… at least, at first. And since it is on Midgard – well,
ythey will put up a fight, to be sure, for humans are not as weak as they once were, but they cannot
hope to stand against the might of Muspelheim for long. Midgard will fall, and the tesseract will be
mine, and then the rest of the Realms with it, so long as none of those in my employ make fools of
themselves.” There was that sound of claws on stone/metal again, and a faint ringing sound as
something was lifted off the stone table. “You consider yourself capable, don’t you, Raxes?”

“I am my lord’s servant.”

“That you are.” There was the sound of a blade swishing through the air. It was the last thing Raxes
heard.

Surtur stared down at the headless body on the stone floor dispassionately. Raxes’ head lay a few
feet away where it had rolled to a stop against the foot of the stone table, but the black of the blood
dripping out of the stump of the neck was what fascinated him.

“You served your lords well, Raxes,” he said. “Too bad they weren’t me.”

*  
The healing rooms took up most of one wing of the palace. Though they were on a public level they
were not bustling, busy places, but quiet and relaxing and full of light. Full of activity and yet still
calming even to those who only came to visit – part of Eir’s devising, no doubt, for though she and
those under her command focused on healing the body, it was just as important to soothe the mind.

Now, the halls were full of people – families, friends, warriors who had been treated and were not
required to stay beyond that – but they parted before Loki as he passed, hands fisted over their hearts
or heads bowed and skirts spread. He nodded to some he passed, but his attention was on Eir, who
waited for him by one of the many fountains here.

“How is she?” he asked in a low voice when he got near. Eir smiled, and something in Loki’s body
eased, just a little.

“In good spirits,” the master healer replied, gesturing down one of the golden-lit hallways. All here
opened to the outside, somehow, for Eir maintained that fresh air was good for aiding recovery.
“And tenacious as ever she was. Lady Sif has made plain her desire to go immediately back out to
the battlefield, though I think I have managed to impress upon her the need for rest. Her wounds
were not as bad as others I have seen on the warriors or even some I have seen on her, but she will
need a few days’ rest to ensure her full recovery.”

They paused outside a doorway obscured by opaque green curtains. “What else, Eir?” he asked
quietly. She gave him a very level look.

“Remember that this was the first time she has seen true battle. Oh, I know you all have been
questing since the Allfather allowed all of you out into the Realms – I’ve treated the lot of you
enough – but this realm has not seen anything like this since the Great War, before you were born.
With Surtur, it will be worse.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that the Lady Sif does not need to rest only her body.” Eir gave him a pointed look, and
though Loki bristled a moment, he said nothing. He might be king of the Realms, but he wasn’t
going to question her rule over this particular kingdom she’d carved for herself. He would not be
short-sighted enough to rouse the ire of someone who could hold his life in her hands at some point.

“It is nothing you need concern yourself overmuch with,” Eir continued after a moment. “Sif is
resilient in body and mind. Simply a thought, my king.”

It was not simply anything, but Loki nodded anyway. “My thanks, then,” he said, and pushed the
curtain aside to go in. A week ago, things would have been such that he wouldn’t have dreamed of
doing this without Sif asking him to, but things had changed between them. Everything was
changing, and the thought of that change terrified him, deep down, for he was not sure how he was
going to change, and whether or not he wanted to in the first place.

But those thoughts weren’t important right now. He let the curtain swing shut behind him and
instantly the noise from the hallway muffled, though the cloth wasn’t terribly thick. His mother had
woven it, no doubt, and put some of her own magic into it. Still, it was good for privacy. That was
another benefit to being royalty – a whole room had been given over to Sif, the gold of the walls
softened by more cloth in soothing blues and greens. Sif was stark in contrast, red and black and
vibrant against the cooler colors.

That part was right, at least. Much like himself, Sif had always stood out against the dull background
of the rest in her own way, even before childish attractions had become adult desires. Neither one of
those were first in his mind, though, as he made his way over to where she sat, staring into the fire
with her chin in one palm. Her hair had been washed and brushed out and was still drying down her
back, and her wounds gleamed with some healing salve or another. He could see where they would
scar, and Sif would wear them proudly, but right now they seemed almost as bad as they had when open.

She looked up as he sat beside her. “If you mean to put some kind of charm upon me so that I don’t leave the healing room, you needn’t bother,” she told him. “Eir made it clear what she would do if I reopened one of these.” Her fingers brushed over the salve-covered wounds.

“I know better than to try to bespell you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

“Good to see you’ve come into sense now that you’re king.”

“And you seem to have come into more thoughtful moods since becoming queen.”

“I seem to suffer from too much time spent near a bad influence.” Sif’s smile was almost her usual wolfish one, though it faded quickly. “Though I wonder if it is indeed a terrible thing to think more.”

Loki regarded her curiously for a moment, then glanced away. “And so the warrior queen becomes a philosopher as well,” he said. It was easy to hide behind flippancy and jests and the appearance of insincerity. “The influence must be terrible indeed. Though… I have always been enamored of thinking, myself. Not that many—by which he meant Thor, he realized, the axis around which so much else about himself turned—ever listened, but it is a nice sentiment.”

Sif was quiet at that, and it began to be unnerving. Always after a fight she had been smiling, laughing, telling him to put their exploits into song and poetry that would live on long after the lot of them were dead and gone to Valhalla. But something was different this time, and it was not just the foe, or that when she shifted position, she winced and held her side until she got comfortable.

“Do your wounds trouble you?” he asked at last. It was unusual for him to be the one to break the silence. “I can send for Eir or—”

“No, my wounds are fine – a mountain troll clubbed me here—she indicated her side—and drove my mail into my skin, but it is well on the way to healing now. I am… I think of the battle.”

“A glorious one, by the accounts I have heard. And successful in its aim of repelling Surtur’s forces from the dwarf’s forge.”

“It was glorious, ‘tis true.”

“Then forgive me for saying so, my lady, but you are not yourself.”

“You mean I am not down with the rest of the soldiers raising flagons of mead to the fallen and scoring my tally of kills against the others?”

“Yes, I mean that.”

“It was not what I expected.” Sif leaned forward, stirring the glowing coals with the poker. “The battle. I have seen and killed and felt it singing in my veins, and I did on this field as well, but something was different. The price was higher, the threat of what would happen if victory was not ours higher still. These foes… we have faced them singly, before, but never united.”

Loki almost paused her to argue that they had, in fact, as he recalled a time in one of the misty mountain valleys of Nidavellr, but he held his tongue. It was not an appropriate time. So he simply made a twirling gesture with a finger when she glanced over, as if urging her on.

“And that is not the whole of it,” she said. “The soldiers who died were under my command. The
ones wounded too grievously to fight on were wounded because I led them to battle. I am responsible for their deaths, for the sudden turns in the lives of others. We trained with some of them, Loki. I trained some of them myself.”

“But you cannot think their blood is on your hands alone.” It seemed clear to him now what troubled her, and he wondered why he did not see it sooner. Her dutifulness had masked it, and Loki knew all about using one thing to hide another much darker. “It is as much the fault of the one we fight, as it is the fault of myself, as it is yours.”

“I am no leader, not like you or Thor,” Sif replied. “I am a warrior – I fight in defense of Asgard, of my home… my king. I can see the ebb and flow of battle, can see where I am needed, but to hold the lives of others in my hands – that is something I have learned, yes, but never had to do.”

“We did it all the time.”

“That was different. That was our group, we friends venturing out, six against the Realms and the darkness in them.” She shook her head. “I thought I knew war, Loki. But it is very different when you are responsible for an entire army.”

They were both silent, Loki contemplating that he knew well what Sif meant, in a way. It was one thing to play at being king, to think on it and yearn for the opportunity. It was another entirely to be a king, to know that one’s decisions affected not just your fate or the fate of a small group of people, but of an entire realm. He had started out with the intention of proving something – to himself, to Sif and Thor and his parents, to everyone – but matters had moved beyond that.

“For what it’s worth, Sif, by the accounts of others who have seen more war than you or I, you acquitted yourself as a seasoned leader might. They are already telling stories of your exploits in the barracks, I am told.”

That made her smile one of her wolfish smiles. “Truly?”

“They call you the warrior queen, or else the dragon queen, for you fight with the intensity of dragonfire and are as fierce as an angered wyrm when pressed, and are quite cunning besides.”

“That has the mark of a silvered tongue on it.”

Loki spread his hands, his smile very pointed. “Well, one cannot fault a wordsmith for wishing to practice his craft when he gets the chance.”

“I suppose not.” She gave him a curious, intense look. “You aren’t lying about what they say?”

For a long moment, Loki met her eyes. There was openness in them, something he had not seen in weeks – months. Something he craved, and not only from her.

“No,” he replied. “I’m not.”

Sif smiled again, a very satisfied smile this time. “Good.” And then, hurriedly, for it seemed that she was pleased not only with the news of the soldiers: “I would hate to embarrass myself in front of my men.”

He let out a breath. “I doubt we would have an army left to field if they dared mock you.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Sif tilted her chin up a bit, but she was still smiling.

They talked for a little while more after food had been brought – nothing heavy, for Loki was required at the feast table tonight as he had missed the previous night (something Sif crowed about, though there was a glitter in her eyes that said he had not, perhaps, made a bad decision), but enough
to make the evening meal for Sif and something to tide him over. The tension between them had eased, and if things were not back to how they had been before then they were at least on the right road again, he thought. He had never been good at reading this particular part of interaction.

When the sun had dipped much lower and the bell had rung to announce dinner would be laid shortly, Loki stood. “I’m afraid I must take my leave of the dragon queen,” he said with an exaggerated bow.

“Throwing yourself willingly into the wolf’s den alone, Loki?”

“Sacrifices must be made, regrettably.” He hesitated, then scooped up her hand and when she did not yank it away, pressed his lips to her knuckles, to hide that his tongue had grown inexplicably thick in his mouth. “It is good that you returned well,” he said at last, with difficulty. Awkward and hardly delivered with the kind of polish he expected from himself, but Sif’s lips twitched.

“I told you to have faith in my skill,” she said. “I dislike proving myself wrong in matters of the sword.”

“I did. Have faith, that is.” Stars and Branches, it was as if he had transported himself back into his adolescence. “But I’m allowed to have concern for the well-being of my queen.”

“I suppose if you must.” Still, it seemed that Sif let his hand go but reluctantly. “Eir has said she will release me tomorrow?”

“In the morning. But you are not to take yourself down to the training yard straightaway. Eir was quite clear about that.”

Sif made a sour face, but settled back against the couch again. “She needn’t tell me twice. I have seen her angry at others for reopening wounds and undoing her work.”

The silence lasted almost long enough to become awkward, but Loki shut down the maelstrom of words he could say, none of which sounded very silver-tongued and all of which seemed much more heartfelt than what he came up with, which was, “Tomorrow, then.”

Sif seemed about to say something as well, but didn’t. “Tomorrow. Good night, Loki.”

*  

Morning saw Loki meeting with Edwik in the king’s antechamber off Gladsheim. After the soldiers’ homecoming yesterday he had declared today a rest day for the city, and most of the courtiers had been feasting until late. Loki had excused himself before the candles had burned to the midnight mark but bade the festivities continue on with his blessing (even going so far as to conjure a burst of green and gold fireworks that drifted down over the main table, much to everyone’s delight) and collapsed into bed. The exhaustion had had a tinge of relief in it this time – relief that he had not made a bad decision to send troops in as he had, relief that Sif had returned relatively unharmed, relief that the first victory of this war had gone to Asgard. It had been a decisive victory as well. That would be good for morale.

But it was morning, and the time for frivolity was past. Edwik had detailed their losses and laid out his reports, and while the news was still good, it was still sobering to think that they had lost so many and—and what? Defended a dwarf who was for the time being a guest of the throne? Loki had not had the best experiences with dwarves in the past and disliked having one so close, but it had been what Odin or Thor would have done, and Loki had realized the value of it.

“All magical items that Kronar said the giants had been interested in are now safely in the designated
Loki leaned on the table where he had conjured another map of the Realms, with colored markers for what troops they knew were where, eyes flicking from one Realm to the next. “Surtur’s forces move close to the lighter Realms and to Midgard, all of which are on our own doorstep.”

“It would be bold to attack Asgard directly, even for him. At least, from what I’ve read of the last time he raised an army and went to war.”

Loki said nothing. It would be bold, yes; but time and thought changed things. He knew about shifting one’s approach to a problem, and it was hardly a stretch to say that Surtur, a powerful, ancient magical being, would do the same. But he could not say so. He had no idea who of his advisors he could trust – even Edwik was not beyond suspicion, much as Loki would have preferred to bring him into his plans, confide in him that something in the way things were playing out in this first round seemed amiss.

A talented liar can spot a lie, he thought. But a liar suspects everyone of lying. I need to find someone honest. Someone I trust—oh.

“If the Allfather were awake—“

Loki cut him off. “Then we would neither of us be here. Inform me of new developments, and if our scouts bring back any information we might use.” He waved a hand and the magical display vanished.

If he was confused by Loki’s sudden change in direction, Edwik hid his surprise well. Though most of the courtiers laughed behind their hands at the antics of their quicksilver king, there were those who, like Edwik and himself, saw it as a distinct advantage.

“As you wish, my king.”

Loki waited until he was gone before setting off himself, cape billowing with the speed of his passage.

* *

Sif was flexing one of her arms in front of one of Eir’s seconds when Loki walked in. The master healer bowed his head, then said, “One more time, my lady, to be certain.”

Sif rolled her eyes but put the arm through a full range of movement, twisting and bending each way. The pink of the healing wounds stood out against the unmarred skin, but already it seemed better to him than it had the night before. Eir’s magic was strong and subtle.

“It’s not as though I haven’t been hurt before,” she said. The healer simply marked something off on his parchment. “Worse than this.”

“You were not queen then,” Loki pointed out. She gave him a look.

“Only a title and a vow set me apart from the other warriors,” she said, lifting her tunic so the healer
could inspect the bruising on her torso—it looked bad, dark purple and angry red spread across the skin patterned after her mail, but it didn’t seem to bother her as much as it had last night, either. “I deserve no special treatment.”

“But your recovery means the room you were in may be given to those who need the care,” the healer pointed out, forestalling any arguments from Loki. “And it seems you have met Lady Eir’s exacting standards—though remember, do not train this first day, and tomorrow go lightly. Apply this salve—“he handed her a sealed pot—“whenever the previous application dries. Keeping the skin hydrated will prevent it from tightening and tearing and limiting your mobility, and there are herbs in the mixture that will speed the healing process along.” He turned his dark eyes to Loki, the sparkle of good humor in them. “I understand you know spells to restrain. Don’t hesitate if she insists on riding out to face a legion of trolls this afternoon.”

“I’ll see to the matter personally,” Loki said, with the utmost solemnity. “My thanks, master healer.”

They were bowed out of the room, and Sif scowled at him as they left the healing rooms together. “If you truly intend on keeping me from where I’m needed—“

“I am no fool to make the attempt,” he told her. “But this first day you must heed Eir’s instructions.”

“I cannot serve our realm if I am so limited.”

“Can’t you?” He gave her a sly, sidelong look. “There is more depth to you than your shield and glaive and your warrior’s vow, Sif, I have known it for a long time. It so happens I have something for which your talents are uniquely suited, and which will not violate Eir’s strictures.”

That made her pause and narrow her eyes, stopping in the middle of the hall. “What are you scheming this time?”

He put his hands up. “No schemes. All I ask is that you watch the people I call into my study as I talk to them.”

“You are the one skilled at reading others,” she said dubiously. “Why not do it yourself?”

“The eyes often see what they want to see. Even mine.” He stopped too, turning to face her. “But you are just as skilled at reading others as I am. Warriors have to be, otherwise they’d be dead their first time out. Surely simply observing people as they speak and listen is not beyond you?”

“It isn’t.” They started walking again, heading toward the upper levels. Sif seemed thoughtful, if still skeptical. “You want me to sit in your study and look at people.”

“Well, you’ll have to be sneaky about it. If you think you can be sneaky.”

“I can. I did marry a fine liar,” she muttered, and then seemed to regret saying it. They were both silent for a time as they walked, and then she spoke again. “This is about the spy you mentioned after the meeting the other night, isn’t it?” At his nod, Sif bit her lip in thought, and then nodded herself. “If it’s a warrior’s skills you need, stealth is among mine.”

“It needn’t be cloak-and-dagger,” Loki said. “If they see you, say, polishing your armor to one side, none will think much of it. As I said, people see what they want to see.”

“Stealth and deception.” She raised her eyebrows, but her grin was edging toward wolfish.

“It seems we’ve much to teach each other.”
“So it seems.” Sif peeled off toward the stairs leading up to the level of their chambers. “If those dullard attendants tried cleaning my gear, Stars help them…”

Loki smiled, but was glad she wasn’t looking. He knew it wasn’t one she would have liked to see.

Wisely the attendants had left her armor and her weaponry for her personal attention, beyond cleaning her blades so the corrosive blood wouldn’t cause them harm. Little could rust true Asgardian-forged steel, but he knew Sif never liked to take the chance. She set up her kit at one of the seating areas by the balcony and spread everything out across the table before her, the couch she sat upon, and the floor nearby, and was apparently hard at work when the first of his suspects was summoned to his study.

“Welcome to my study, Lord Knorlsson,” Loki said cordially. Knorlsson was a high-ranking member of the Allfather’s council that he had kept on, in part for reasons of efficiency. The man had been a metalsmith before inheriting his father’s title and lands, and had fought beside Odin in the Great War as well, and now represented the metalsmithing and armorer guilds – powerful ones, in a society such as Asgard’s. Loki took in his behavior now: calm, confident. No nervous tics visible, nor apprehension at being brought to a high level of the palace for the first time.

“It is an honor to be here, my king.” He bowed, and Loki crossed to a small table that held a decanter and two glasses.

“Perhaps some wine?”

“That would be fine, Your Majesty.”

Loki glanced over at Sif who wisely appeared to be engrossed in getting a streak of dust off a pauldron, caught Knorlsson looking at Sif as well, and smiled thin-lipped. It was no secret that Knorlsson had long hoped to court her, but the late elder Lord had fortuitously married him off before a claim could be made, at the advice of someone higher-ranked than he.

“Your lands are productive this season,” he said, bringing the two goblets of wine back to the chairs they sat in. “And your wife – I hear she is at last with child?”

“She is.”

“Productive indeed, and you will present them when they are born, I hope.” Secretly, he hoped not; children, and the thought of parenthood in general, were things that baffled him and made him apprehensive. “Children are such a joy to have at court.”

Sif made a ‘tch’ noise, and both of them turned to look over at her. She met their eyes, one brow arched, and gestured to the piece of armor she was cleaning.

“The goblin that made this nick in my armor—“ she managed to sound offended at the very idea “—actually thought the blow would kill me. They are so ridiculous, those.” She bent her head back over her work.

“I’m certain our queen will be happy to regale you with stories of her exploits at Kronar’s forge tomorrow night,” Loki said, turning back to Knorlsson. “But to my point, my lord—you represent the interests of many guilds here, guilds which will be quite important to the war effort. By the end of the next week I hope to have enough men outfitted to garrison them at Depthis, an outpost of Alfheim.” Loki was glad he had positioned them so that Sif was behind Knorlsson, for she looked up sharply, confused. He continued on. “The mages there have agreed to aid our cause as per the treaty we have with them. I would not send our warriors in without the best armor and weaponry we can
provide them.”

“A wise decision. Difficult to defend anything if you can’t defend yourself, my king.”

“Very well put. Now, the throne is willing to pay…”

It was a similar ploy with the others called in. The things he asked of them were legitimate concerns that needed to be addressed – the production of arms, of food, the question of morale within the city, the amount of tribute given to the palace by the different regions – but Loki carefully tailored other parts of the conversation, leading it along without seeming to, doing it all with a smile and a regality that surprised even himself. Sif, he knew, had caught on to half of it at the first, but the glances she kept throwing at him every time he said I intend to garrison troops at or there is an urgent matter of war that requires attention in or I believe this may be a pivotal battleground to hold for Asgard clearly said she had questions that he would have to answer. Otherwise, they drank wine or ate light meals, Sif’s armor and weaponry began to gleam again with every layer of grit smoothed off them, and the sun had turned the edge sea to liquid gold by the time Edwik, the last to be called in, rose and bowed.

“Thank you for the meal, my king,” he said. “I will do as you ask.”

“I know you will,” Loki replied. This one had been more difficult than the others. Edwik was not precisely a friend, but he was a quantity that Loki preferred to think he knew the value of. There were precious few he could say that about. “But rest this night and see to it on the morrow. It is not an urgent matter.”

“As you wish.” Edwik bowed again as Loki rose. The door shut behind him with a very final-sounding thud, and the room was silent save for the crackling of the hearth and the occasional ring of steel on steel as Sif moved her things around, but even that slowed and stopped as she lost herself in thought.

“The mages were moved from Depthis,” she said at last. “They’re on Alfheim proper now.”

“I know.”

“And none of the other places are actually of any value in this war. They’re all… old. Abandoned, out of the way.”

“That’s right.”

“You told everyone a different lie.”

“I told them all things that are just far enough off the truth to keep our true interests safe, but close enough to not be obvious plants.” He watched as she packed up her knives and her armor and laid them into the cloth she’d used to bundle them in.

“You called Edwik in.”

“I could not find a reason not to.”

“Even if he is one of your closest advisors?” She drew the cloth closed and looked at him. “One of the few warriors who never looked at you askance for choosing knives and magic over swords and spears, and he is still suspected.”

He looked at his hands, one blunt thumbnail sliding along the creases in the opposite palm. “I wish I could say that there were others here I trusted than you and my mother.”
Sif looked pleased. “So you do trust people.”

“Only the trustworthy ones.” Loki hesitated a moment before going to sit beside her, glad when she made no move to slide away. The hope that had been kindled before— that things between them had shifted somehow between the night of the Midsummer feast and now, that he had not ruined this as he ruined so much else— burned a little brighter, and he was surprised at just how relieved that made him feel. “I needed you here to watch for the things I could not see. You know—it is not easy for me to see the good in people, Sif.”

“I know. Sometimes caution serves you well, though. Other times it would be as well to simply lose yourself in a thing, rather than think too much about it.” She stretched, grimaced as the motion pulled on her hurts, and rose, collecting the bundle of her things on her way toward the door. “I intend to be at the training yard at first light tomorrow,” she said. “So I am going to turn in. Healing is boring, tiring work, and being sneaky is even more exhausting. I really don’t know how you do it.”

Loki watched her go, then looked away at the flickering shadows cast by the fire so he did not have to watch her walk away again. He’d seen it entirely too often lately, and it was beginning to weary him.

But then she paused, her hand on the door, and looked back at him. The mischief in her grin was entirely too familiar. “Aren’t you coming?”

*That* stilled his thoughts; the stars seemed to stop for a moment, the sounds of the palace preparing for the nighttime faded. Slowly, he asked, “Do you mean—“

“Exactly what I say, dear husband.” Though there was a glimpse of something else in her eyes, he could not ignore that her grin became pointed for a moment before she pushed the door open and slipped through it.

For a minute Loki sat there staring after her, the door slowly closing, as he processed exactly what had just happened. Then, in a flicker of magic, he *moved* and took up her hand, and was smart enough not to comment when her expression became very, very smug.
Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter and the next chapter were originally meant to be one piece. However, after it passed a certain length (read: after it got too damn long) I split it to make things easier and for better flow.

Be aware there is also a scene that is somewhat more sexually explicit than the others in the story have been. It's not extremely detailed and thus not really enough for me to bump up the rating on the fic as a whole, but if you don't want to read it and wish to skip it I promise you won't be missing too much. This is your fair warning.

transcription; the process of creating a complementary RNA copy of a sequence of DNA. Transcription is the first step in gene expression.

“I do not like it at all.”

“You don’t have to,” Sif said from her place by the hearth. She had returned again from battle the day before and was polishing her armor to a high finish. Less injured this time, at least – the soldiers, having seen her fight several times now in skirmishes and in several more pitched battles since the first at Kronar’s forge, now rallied behind her to the man. Anyone in the Queen’s Regiment in a battle would gladly give their life for her, a fact that laid no less heavily on Sif now than it had at the first. She could understand it at least, being a warrior herself, but she would still return with shadows in her eyes.

But for now the only shadows there were because of the roaring flames. It was almost too hot to have a fire, for the days had been bright and sunny as of late in contrast to the mood of the city, but one had been laid nonetheless. Loki paused a moment to work a simple spell he’d learned long ago, pinching the extra heat in forceps made of magic and bleeding it off into the fire. For a moment the flames leaped higher as the extra energy was expended, then they settled again.

“It isn’t an ideal situation,” he agreed, when that was done and he felt cooler. “But Vanaheim produces much of our food, and with a growing army to provision, it is important to make this visit and maintain our good relations with the Vanir. Not all feathers have been soothed there since the conflict Asgard had with them. I would not fight one war on the battlefield and another in the throne room.”

“Both of you should not be away from Asgard right now.” Vildar was one of the generals ranked just below Sif, and one of those Loki suspected. He was high-born, from a good family loyal to the throne – to the Allfather and Thor, however, and Vildar and his three brothers had never had much regard for Loki at all. Sif had seen nothing from him that indicated discomfort beyond the normal, but being high-born, Vildar could well be skilled at hiding his thoughts. Most of those who spent any length of time at court were. “Visits out of the Realm make you both easy targets. And if you should be killed, my king… well, Thor is banished, and you have no heir—“

“My mother would take up the throne until such time as the Allfather awakens,” Loki interrupted, and the frost in his voice would have cooled him as quickly as the magic. This business of an heir had come up far too often as of late, with Sif riding out so often and the battles increasing in
viciousness, and no sign of Odin awakening to reassert his throne. “That is what has been agreed upon – not that any of it is any business of yours to begin with. My lord.”

There was an awkward silence, then Vildar bowed his head slightly. “My apologies, my king,” he said silkily. “Far be it from me to question the wisdom of the crown.”

“Crowns,” Sif corrected, holding one of her knives up to the light to examine its edge.

“It was my queen’s idea,” Loki agreed. “As leader of our armies, she is most aware of what we need. We cannot defeat Surtur’s armies if we cannot feed our own, for unlike those creatures he has, Asgardians must eat.”

“And you bring the warriors who will take their vows with you.”

“Vanaheim is as good a place to hold the ceremony as any, wouldn’t you say? After all, they have sent some of their own to fight beside our soldiers even when we have been less than kind to the Vanir in the past. We doubly honor them with this.”

“And anyone who wishes to make an attempt on our lives would do well to remember that either one of us can be deadly with little more than the knives they set out at a dinner,” Sif added airily. “It would be foolishness to try, really.”

“Now, that is wisdom you ought to heed.” Loki’s smile was pointed, and only grew as Vildar’s irritation showed more plainly on his face. “My lady is more cunning than most give her credit for, much to their eventual chagrin.”

Vildar’s jaw worked a moment, then he turned to Sif and bowed stiffly, a hand fisted over his heart. “I apologize for my words. It was never my intention to slight you, my lady,” he said formally.

“No slight was taken,” Sif replied. “Simply a request to let the captain of our guards worry about our security, to let us worry about the security of the realm, so we--” she pointed at herself with the tip of the knife in her hand “—can let you—“ she pointed it at Vildar “—continue to worry about your own duties.”

Perhaps to his credit, he did not flinch when she pointed the knife at him. “Of course, my lady. Now that you know my concerns there is no need to press it further. I am certain you will both do what you deem best. For Asgard, as the Allfather would, if he were awake.”

That could almost have been a slight, and Loki bristled for a moment before making himself calm. Vildar was not the only person in Asgard to think that Loki served only himself (which stung more than it had, because now he was trying his best to lead them through a war when he had long since stopped thinking he could get the throne and simply started trying to be considered on equal footing with Thor), so he simply waited until most of the annoyance had filtered away before replying, “Your faith in us is appreciated, Lord Vildar. Now, we have matters which you must attend to in our absence. Sif, if you will…”

They talked for some time after that, with Sif laying out what she wished done – Vildar had always been her second in terms to training the recruits, and though she did not necessarily like him as a person she had long since acknowledged his expertise in other, martial matters. So she was cool but not prickly, though Loki caught looks she gave the young lord’s turned back every so often, like she had smelled something distasteful. It made him smile, though nothing made him more pleased when Vildar finally rose and bowed to both of them.

“If I may take my leave of your majesties?”
Sif nodded. “We’re done here, I believe. Send word if you must, but I trust your judgment in these matters we’ve discussed.”

“And I trust my queen’s judgment,” Loki added, as Vildar made his way to the door, bowed a final time, and left.

Loki shut the door after him, and they both sighed with something like relief. “I thought I could draw out a conversation,” Loki muttered. “Apparently I am not the only one with such a skill.”

“Would that you’d remained the only one,” Sif muttered. Her armor, laid out before her, gleamed in the firelight. Without even looking at it he knew there would be not a single speck of dirt, no stray droplet of corrosive enemy blood. She could have had a whole new set of armor made for her, gilded and fine as a queen’s ought to be, but Sif took pride in the nicks and scrapes and scars. She took pride in the imperfections, because it meant that she was not just talk, that she had gone out and returned thanks to her own skill.

Sometimes Loki envied that she could do so, just as he’d envied Thor’s ability to be open and honest and hold nothing back. He had always been a perfectionist, and now he felt he had to prove that he belonged – not just on the throne, for though there were ways to pull him down it was difficult to argue with the line of succession when nobody else knew he was just a foundling, but in Asgard at all. He was the one who had spent hours before a target, flinging his tiny silver knives until they struck the center every time so that none could mock his skills with them, the one who had spent so many hours in the library studying spellbooks that others had joked he would become a crook-backed librarian covered in dust just to justify his using magic instead of picking up a sword. He had never been able to settle for less than perfect. It was, betimes, exhausting.

“I suppose it was always too much to ask,” he said. As he walked over his formal armor melted away, replaced by a much more comfortable linen tunic and pants. They would have no more visitors tonight, for tomorrow they left for Vanaheim and most were preparing for that. At least in the area of clothes, he could relax; if Sif were to judge him for anything, it wouldn’t be for his wardrobe choices.

“Are you taking all of these?” he asked, moving a cloth with five sharpened knives aside so he could sit next to Sif. She gave him a look.

“I cannot fit all of these,” she replied. “Anymore than you could fit all of your spellbooks. I’ve seen the mess you call a study.”

“I have everything there neatly organized.”

“Not according to any system known to Asgard.”

“Then perhaps it is not from Asgard.”

“Good that you aren’t, then.” She paused, looking at him out of the corner of her eye, and Loki had to keep from sighing. As good as it was that they’d found their impetus for coming back together, as happy as he was that he had woken up the morning after their adventure in subterfuge and Sif had still been tucked in his arms, they still seemed to tiptoe. There were words in their glances, things unspoken in their touches. Loki was good at deciphering these intricacies usually, but there was a level here that he was unfamiliar with, not for lack of study but for lack of experience.

“You’re very quiet,” Sif said, after she had resumed her sharpening and cleaning.

“Vildar used all the words available for the evening, I fear.”
“It’s not that. Usually you can speak about anything even after a day of talking to those who come before you in Gladsheim. This is a different silence.”

“There are different silences?”

“You have many. Betimes you say more by staying silent than by speaking, maddening as that can be despite that I have become more fluent in translating them.” She put her things down, shifting the cloths off her lap, and turned to look at him. “This one…” Sif reached out, and there was a moment’s hesitation before she laid her fingertips on his cheek.

“I’ve been told I think too much.”

“And I’ve been told I sometimes do not think enough.” She pursed her lips, studying his face. “It’s something Vildar said?”

Her tone suggested she’d do something rather distressing to Vildar’s throat if it was so, and Loki had to smile a bit. “It is, but it’s nothing that hasn’t been said to me before.”

“Yet it still troubles you.”

Loki supposed he was going to get away with less in this department now that Sif was more in tune. The more they relaxed around each other, the more he let down his walls, the easier it was for her. Yet it felt like a relief, to do so. Keeping people out was tiring, maintaining his image was even more so, but he didn’t have to do that now. It was hard, though, and for a long time the words wouldn’t – couldn’t – come.

Sif was looking at him expectantly, and when he tried to look away she used her hand on his cheek to keep him looking at her.

“Tell me,” she said, and the tone of her voice loosened something, until he felt the words building up behind his throat in a flood.

“What do you want to know?”

Sif leaned forward, licked her lips, and kissed him. When she pulled away, she smiled at him, and it was beautiful in the firelight.

“Everything.”

*  

As a warrior, Sif was used to rising with the dawn, to putting on her armor or her training leathers and stepping out onto the sands of the training yard that were still damp with the morning’s dew. As a queen, her days began just as early more often than not, though with the additions of breakfasts with certain lords and ladies before she could escape to the training yards. The months between her wedding and now had taught her much, and Sif felt more comfortable with the demands of being a queen, but it would never feel as comfortable or as familiar, and the new weight that settled in her mind whenever she picked up her glaive and shield did not dampen that.

But as they were setting out today, and things had been arranged for a specific time so as to accommodate the difference in daylight between the realms, there were no royal obligations planned for the morning as most of it would be dedicated to final preparations. A fact Sif was glad for as she woke slowly, stretching out beneath the furs. She was warm and her body hummed as she moved, rolling over onto her side, and if she’d had to get up and dress for a meal with people far too invested in matters she would rather keep between herself and Loki, Sif was fairly certain she’d truly be seen
as the dragon queen.

Loki had ended up curled over in a corner of the bed; between Sif’s habit of sprawling and his habit of tucking up into himself, it usually ended up that she took over most of the rather large bed, relegating him to whatever space he could find. Somehow, though, she had missed that when she’d slept alone. It was nice to have him there, a warm and solid and living constant, in the midst of a war where she too often watched people she’d trained with for decades cut down before her.

He had his back to her and Sif reached out, trailing her fingers along it. Not rippling with muscle as Thor’s was, but she knew what Loki’s back felt like, moving under her hands, and knew that he was stronger than his deceptively small frame. *Small, for a Jotun*, Loki had told her last night. There had been a kind of dark amusement in it – he didn’t quite belong on Asgard and much less on its throne, he wouldn’t fit in on Jotunheim either – and it had hurt her heart, because their separation had made her realize that there would always be somewhere he did belong.

Loki stirred when she brushed hair away from his throat and pressed her lips to it – Jotun or not, he was warm there, full of life – and rolled onto his back, reaching out to run a finger over her cheek, saying nothing but simply looking at her through his long lashes. His eyes were a little reddened, for they had talked long into the night, and much of it had been of things Sif imagined that Loki had confessed to nobody else.

They kissed, and she felt his hand push into her hair, fingers curling to hold her where she was, almost like he thought she would vanish if he didn’t. Like he was scared that she would leave now.

Sif had always been better at showing, rather than telling. Loki was the one who had the skill with words, who could spin a story or talk them out of trouble, and he handled language the way she handled her glaive. Last night his words had been thick and slow to come, difficult for him to say to someone else when he could barely admit them to himself. She couldn’t say what she wanted to, to try and dispel the desperation and the fear – she didn’t know the words to convey it. So she simply answered him as best she could, with her actions.

His lips parted and she sighed at the taste of his mouth, sharp on her tongue like peppermint; his hand trailed down her back, light as the brush of a moth’s wings, and Sif buried her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck, ducking down to run her tongue over the long, elegant curve of his throat. It was as though they were at the beginning again, as though the night of their wedding had been but a dream and they were learning each other anew.

And when Loki’s long, clever fingers and his tongue – oh, she hadn’t imagined that *Silvertongue* could be meant in ways other than with words – at last became too much, when Sif looked down and saw Loki watching her, saw one of his hands had slid under him, the strong muscles working hard despite the awkward position, she couldn’t hold back any longer. Her hand flew out, looking for something, anything to hold onto, to anchor her, and when she felt Loki’s free hand catch hers, Sif laced their fingers without thinking.

She didn’t let go after they had both managed to arrange their boneless, sweaty bodies comfortably. Loki’s head was pillowed on her stomach, his hand (she had licked it clean) describing lazy arcs back and forth across her stomach, a little smile on his face. For once he looked content, and as she threaded her fingers through his hair, Sif smiled too. It was a good look on him.

“I suppose we had better make something of ourselves before someone comes in with breakfast and is completely shocked,” she said, after the sun had risen and had begun to slant in under the curtains.

“We worry about shocking others now?”
“I would rather not let just anyone see me bare.” Sif took a deep breath and then sat up, ignoring Loki’s complaints as she nudged him over to the side. “I’m private about such things.”

“As well you should be. I don’t intend to share you with the rest.”

Sif caught him smirking and threw one of the pillows at his head.

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Sif did not remember the Allfather making very many royal visits, and with the kind of chaos she found the courtyard in when she made her way down, she could tell why. Chests of gifts for Njord and the other Vanir nobility were being loaded into carts, along with those which were full of clothes, supplies, all manner of things that Sif imagined would be completely useless and unnecessary. It was all part of the game that they had to participate in as royalty, of course, but it seemed to Sif to be rather excessive.

Loki was already standing by their horses. He wore his formal armor, for they would be officially greeted by the Vanir at the site Heimdall would send them to, and it gleamed golden in the sunlight, from polished boots to the tips of the horns on his helm. His cape seemed to be a more vibrant green, too, swirling heavily around his ankles when he turned to see her approach. Memories of this morning were very fresh in her mind yet, and she caught the tilt of Loki’s lips into a self-satisfied grin before he hid it carefully away. Such things were not for others to see. Only for them.

“Ready, my lady?” he asked.

Sif took the reins from the stablehand holding her horse and checked over her tack herself. New saddlecloths had been made for the occasion, red with a gold border and embroidered with the sigil of the House of Odin. On one corner, Loki’s sigil too, in green bordered with gold, and… on the opposite her own, silver and a deep reddish maroon to match the colors she wore. The house Sif came from was small, so it was strange to see it there, but she was queen now. She supposed it belonged, though the whole effect was very showy. She mounted up.

“As ever I’ll be,” she replied. “And if everyone else is as well, we should not keep Heimdall waiting. I am given to understand we’ve a schedule to keep.”

“Tell everyone to mount up,” Loki instructed one of the stewards hanging about him. “Anyone not prepared to leave by the time the queen and I ride off the palace grounds will be left.”

Shouts rang out, louder and more urgent; the last chests were loaded onto the carts, their guards mounted and formed up around them, the warriors accompanying their party and the ones to take their vows clustered together behind the royal party. Vár was helped onto the seat of one of the carts and her carved wooden box of scrolls handed up to her.

One of her attendants handed Sif her helm. As she slid it on, it seemed to her that it sat less heavily upon her head, feeling like less like a rock tying her down and more like a part of her. Perhaps it was only that she was not riding into battle this time, but she doubted that that was the only reason, for when Loki mounted beside her he seemed to sit his horse more easily in the formal armor, his shoulders not bowed as though he bore a great weight upon them.

*Confidence suits you better, husband,* she thought, and grinned.

Then the order to depart came, and Sif nudged her horse forward beside Loki’s as they trotted out of the courtyard and across the palace grounds.

Loki had told her once that the bridge connecting Heimdall’s Observatory to the city was half actual
craftsmanship and half magic – old magic, older than any he knew, the same kind as the enchantment upon Mjolnir. The craftsmanship made it straight and strong; the magic gave it its luster, allowed Heimdall’s control of the Bifrost to extend along it, which was use for transporting larger groups that would otherwise be very uncomfortable in the Observatory.

Sif could feel the magic as soon as her horse’s hooves rang on the stone, pulsing with light from the activated Bifrost. She had none of Heimdall’s talents, though they shared one of his mothers, but the fact they were related meant she was somewhat more sensitive to such things than the average Asgardian. Her courser pranced sideways a bit and she clucked softly to him, reaching out to stroke his neck as they trotted onward. Heimdall would not send them on until all were ready, and unfortunately the baggage train would take a bit longer.

Traveling mounted on the Bifrost was different than traveling on foot. When the light built up Sif closed her eyes, kept a firm hand on the reins, and relaxed into her cantle more. Her mount was hot-blooded but accustomed to this, and so he only snorted once before they were engulfed. There was still the sense of motion, of flying toward another realm’s ground, but instead of feeling as though they were going to hurtle headfirst Sif felt her stomach flip over as though the world was righting itself, and when she opened her eyes, they were in Vanaheim.

Beyond the crowd of people standing around the grassy knoll they’d been deposited upon, gently rolling hills covered in golden wheat were laid out on either side of the straight road to the city gates, and the rich color of the crops was echoed in the color of the buildings. Vanaheim was a realm of growing things, of rich earth and the fullness of life, and through the canopy to tall green trees, spires rose up into the sky. Though not as grand as Asgard’s buildings, they were certainly fine to look at, and took all manner of shapes and colors – most were gold, but there was one that seemed to have a vine wrapped around it, and there one as richly red as the wood of some trees. Beyond all that, a brilliantly blue ocean stretched across the horizon, smooth as glass.

It had been long since Sif had been here for a purpose other than a quest or a skirmish, for Surtur was not foolish. Take out Vanaheim, the breadbasket of the lighter realms, and no army could be fielded for long.

Loki moved his horse forward and she went with him, and their standard-bearers followed behind as they approached the delegation in the center. Vanir were beautiful people, from the nobility to the lowest farmhand, and dressed in rich, earthy colors. Njord, in the center, wore a long tunic the color of sand, embroidered in blue thread that matched exactly the oceans for which he was so fond. She had sailed with him, before, his ship skimming her and Thor and the rest of them across the waves to some glory. He planted his feet wide, as though on deck, and though the rest bent the knee when she and Loki dismounted, he bowed from the waist, his inky black hair spilling over his brow. They were close to equals, after all, though Vanaheim was sworn to Asgard.

There was a short welcoming ceremony, traditional words that had to be said, and then at the end of it the Vanir bowed again.

“On behalf of the people of Vanaheim, I, Njord, son of the waters, welcome you to our realm. You have our hospitality, Loki of the House of Odin, King of the Nine Realms, and you Sif, queen and warrior.”

“We thank you for your kind and most gracious welcome,” Loki replied formally, his fist over his heart. “My queen and I accept your hospitality, and hope you will accept gifts we have brought to honor your house and your realm.”

“It would please us greatly, and we in turn have gifts for our sovereigns. Let us return to the city and exchange them over bread and drink.”
That was the signal for the Vanir to disperse and prepare for procession back to the city, leaving the three of them standing together alone. Njord and Loki seemed to be sizing each other up, but then the Vanir smiled, his teeth very white in his tan face and the corners of his dark eyes crinkling.

“You’ve done well for yourself, Loki,” he said. “As dark as the circumstances are, I must say that you have done well.”

“Would that my lord father had not had to enter the Odinsleep,” Loki replied. It had the sound of something that Loki thought the other would expect to hear, and it was only because Sif had learned to differentiate between what Loki said and the more subtle cues of what he meant that she picked up on it. Most didn’t know that well, of course. Njord didn’t.

“Would that your brother had not been banished, either.” And there Sif could pick out the tightening of Loki’s jaw and the way his face became a careful mask, appearing natural though hardly that. “But the Fates weave as they will, and there’s little any of us can say in the matter. Though I’m sure they found your strand a tangle, my queen.” He smiled at Sif, now. “A lady warrior, and now a warrior queen. But we are especially grateful to you, for keeping our villagers safe.” He bowed again, more deeply, and Sif only could endure it a moment before she touched his shoulder and bid him rise.

“I am honor-bound to protect the citizens of Asgard and those realms that are bound to us,” she said. “And even if I were not, I would not have made any other choice. I cannot leave innocent people to die at the hands of foul creatures.”

“We shelter many refugees within our walls. Some of them will surely want to show their gratitude to you, my lady.”

“Then they are welcome.” Sif smiled a little, though she still felt uncomfortable. It was not something she felt she needed to be praised for, as though her actions were out of the ordinary. It was simply the right thing to do.

One of the Vanir attendants came over. “All is ready, my lords, my lady,” she said, and handed Njord the reins of his horse.

“Then let us be off. Rooms have been prepared for you, and tonight, there will be a feast in honor of your arrival. Asgard may pride itself on these things, but I assure you, my lord, a Vanir celebration is not to be missed.”

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The sea breeze made the pennants snap, their fastenings clanking against the metal uprights they were hung from. The noises were joined by the soft rustling of the crowd gathered behind the six ranks of nine warriors each – their families, the Vanir invited to the ceremony, and beyond the ring of mounted soldiers and the warriors that had already taken their vows, the people in the city who had gathered to see what they could see and for the parade that would take place afterward.

Sif stood with Loki and Vár in front of the other dignitaries that had been invited to stand on the golden dais on one side of the plaza. She was glad that she didn’t have to wear a gown like the other women standing with her; though Vár’s cloak looked warm, the others were in silky dresses. Sif had had a skirt of dark red embroidered with silver designed for her, and a matching hooded shrug much like her jacket. She hadn’t been able to get out of wearing her crown, but the way the emeralds sparkled in the dragon’s eyes managed to compliment the silverwork and the shine of her armor. All in all it was much warmer and more comfortable, and given that most of the ladies present had their mouths pressed together in an attempt not to shiver, she felt completely justified in going for comfort.
and practicality over formality.

Loki hadn’t escaped wearing full formal, but with the sun touching his armor and making him look nearly as brightly golden as Thor, Sif didn’t consider it a great loss. He certainly looked kingly, not at all the man whom many courtiers still laughingly called the quicksilver king, with Gungnir clasped in one hand, his cape flared out around him and the ends of his hair curling over the back of his armor.

“You have all acquitted yourselves with distinction on the battlefield, and conducted yourselves as befits a citizen of Asgard – with honor, loyalty, and integrity not just to one realm, but to all realms that are sworn to the throne,” he said, and Sif watched with some amusement as the soon-to-be warriors straightened slightly, glazed looks falling off their faces. She remembered being in those ranks very well, though it was hundreds of years ago now. She too had wanted to be done with the speeches and the ceremony and simply take her vows, and prove that she was not wrong in having done so – that a woman could be a warrior just as much as anyone else, that a woman’s heart was not unfit to serve her realm with steel rather than with spindle.

“You have served your king dutifully and without complaint. Is it still your wish to swear yourself to Asgard, until the end of days?”

Fifty-four voices answered as one. “It is.”

“Do you swear to serve faithfully and swear fealty only to Asgard, putting no other realms before your realm and no other kings before your king?”

“We swear.”

“Do you swear to obey dutifully the commands of your superiors, and to uphold their word to the best of your ability?”

“We swear.”

“Do you swear to defend Asgard to the last breath in your body, unto the darkening of the skies and the withering of Yggdrasil?”

“We swear.”

“Thrice sworn, let you come forward now and put your name and your blood in the scrolls of Var, and make the final vow that will bind you, blood, flesh, and bone, to your word.”

Loki stepped aside as Vár stepped forward, her handmaidens laying her scrolls out on a table made of old oak. Vár’s weathered fingertips caressed the parchment a moment before the first new warrior came up to take his oaths. As they watched, Loki leaned over a bit.

“Was it too much, do you think?”

“Hardly at all.” Their elbows brushed. “I think most of them appreciated the theatricality.”

Loki looked pleased with himself. “Good. I’d hate for it to be boring. Then everyone would think I was losing my touch.”

Then the warriors came over to them and the minutes passed quickly. Sif, who knew most of them, was able to say something to each one as they clasped hands – in jest or in seriousness – that made each one smile. Before long, the warriors were back in their ranks, and Loki moved forward again.

“Now bound to serve Asgard and all the Nine Realms, I bid you rise, warriors, and turn to face those
you are sworn to protect. May the light of Yggdrasil illuminate your path, and may the skein of your lives be full of glory.”

A cheer rose up, and as one the ranks of warriors put their fists over their hearts and bowed their heads before the crowd, and everyone on the dais applauded politely.

Before too long those in the parade had retreated to the courtyard of Njord’s sprawling estate to get organized and mounted up. Sif did away with the skirt but kept the leather shrug – the wind had a chilly bite to it, despite the warm sun – and changed her crown for the helm.

Gylfi danced under her. “I know,” she said soothingly, moving him back into position beside Loki. “It’s all very tedious.”

“We could be sitting in a hall somewhere simply letting everyone come to us,” Loki said. “This is much more interesting.”

“Is it?”

“People in a crowd give away a lot more than they think they do. One is not as anonymous in a sea of faces as one thinks, sometimes.” The gates began to creak open, and Loki moved his horse back into position, their standard-bearers taking up their places to either side. “It will be interesting to see whether or not the Vanir truly have put the past behind them.”

It certainly appeared they had to Sif, as they rode through the streets. Here and there, among groups of those who had been displaced by raids from Surtur’s forces, she could see sour expressions though. She would never have noticed had Loki not made the comment before setting off. And she would not have noticed Loki’s own nervousness, for all the confidence he seemed to have. Even after months of holding the throne, Loki was used to working in the shadows, and being front and center in a parade was obviously uncomfortable for him.

As their route proceeded along the loop that had been laid out for them, Sif noticed that the crowd changed. Close to the beaches, the people were well-dressed – Vanir nobility, the lords and ladies and magicians who sometimes came to Asgard. Now, closer to the city walls, it seemed that there were more of the refugees that had come in from the outer villages. People with darkly tanned faces and the weatherbeaten look of farmers, people whose hands were not creamy and soft-looking but gnarled and calloused. Their children pressed forward as far as they could go, straining for a glimpse of them, and Sif found herself waving and smiling a bit more enthusiastically. The people in the crowds might think they were anonymous, but the children weren’t, and when Sif saw one she recognized she figured she shouldn’t have been so surprised.

Hawkers had been selling wooden swords, and shields painted with the colors of the House of Odin. In the more well-off parts of the city every child had seemed to have one; here, fewer did, and those in possession of them seemed to be regarded with looks of fierce jealousy by the rest. In a group of children standing up on the steps of a building to see better there was one sword, clutched by a girl – the same one, Sif realized, who she had personally carried back to Asgard. That group of villagers had since gone back to Vanaheim but rebuilding was slow, and most of the women and children remained in the city for protection while the men rebuilt villages and planted crops.

What had been the girl’s name? Arla? That sounded right, Sif thought, smiling a bit as she watched the group. The smile faded, though when she watched a little closer and saw that Arla kept turning back toward the boy (her brother, if Sif remembered correctly) and trying to grab the wooden sword he had, but the boy kept pulling it out of her reach and scowling, and each time, Arla looked more and more distressed, glancing back as Sif approached.
For a moment, her heart broke. Arla had been awed by Sif’s skill (she had said as much, as Sif was walking her into the palace, looking shy and very red in the face) and to see her with that held out of her reach…

Sif spun Gylfi around, trotting him back to where the set of steps was. The crowd hastily parted, and Sif ignored the looks of mingled suspicion and sudden interest, along with Loki shouting for everyone to halt and then asking her what she was doing as she nudged her horse through the little cleared path. All the children suddenly looked down at their feet, Arla’s brother still clasping the sword and Arla herself looking on the verge of tears.

“It’s good to see you again,” she told the little girl. “Is all well here?”

“We’re fine, my lady,” Arla insisted, but her eyes shifted over to her brother and the sword again. Sif raised an eyebrow, and the girl’s face crumpled.

“I bought it,” she wailed. “I saved up my coppers for today and I bought it myself, and Kavan just took it!”

“You wouldn’t know what to do with a sword if you had one!”

“I just wanted you to see me with it.” Arla looked down. “I just want to be a warrior like you, my lady. But Kavan and Mama tell me it’s not possible, that they’d never train me with the boys.”

Sif felt her heart ache. “If they don’t, more fool them,” she said. “Vanaheim would be lucky to have one with as strong a heart as yours fighting for it. Any realm would.” She gave Kavan a pointed look and meekly, he handed over the sword. Sif smiled – she knew all about proud little boys and saving face.

“You both have good hearts,” she told them. “You for obedience, Kavan, and you for your tenacity, Arla. Both are things that warriors ought to have and hold dear. Arla,” Sif began, feeling what was probably a crazy idea coming on. “Would you like to ride with me? A true warrior of the realms always rides to protect her sovereign, after all.”

“May I take my sword, my lady?”

“You may take your sword. What else would you protect me with? Kavan, help her up, please, and tell your mother one of my guards will ensure she is safely returned.”

Sif made Gylfi shift round so Kavan could lift Arla up in front of Sif. After a moment, she gestured for Kavan to follow her and rode over to one of the hawkers that had stopped to watch.

“Give this young man one of the wooden swords,” she said. “And then come to Njord’s mansion when we return to it. I will see to it myself that you are repaid.” She stayed until the hawker had done so and then trotted back to her place in the column, falling back in as the order to move ahead was given again.

Now, the faces she passed seemed to look at her differently – if not with respect, then with amusement or surprise. Loki seemed to have much the same mix of expressions, and as for Arla, it seemed not to matter which one of them spoke to her, she would bury her face in Sif’s arm. But she did as Sif asked and raised her little toy sword high, grinning madly the whole time.

By the time they got back to the estate she was pretty certain Arla wouldn’t stop smiling for days, and shrieked with joy as Sif cantered them around one of the grassy areas before bringing them back inside the courtyard. She slid off first and then held out her hands for Arla to hop down.
“Thank you for taking me along, my lady,” the girl said shyly.

“Just promise me that I’ll see you taking your warrior’s oaths someday, Arla,” Sif replied. “I mean my words – Vanaheim would be lucky to have you defending it.”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

She saw Arla off safely not with a guard, but with Fandral, who swept a dashing bow for her and kissed her hand before they trotted back into the city. Sif stood by Gylfi, loosening his girth and watching until they disappeared.

“She idolizes you, you know.”

Sif looked over her shoulder. Loki could sneak up on anyone – one of his magician’s tricks, his ability to move from one place to another so quickly – and it was only because she was so used to it that she didn’t jump. “You’re losing your touch, Silvertongue,” she said. “I could tell that all on my own.”

“And you say you have no mind for politics and diplomacy. By doing this for one of their own, you’ve made yourself a rather large number of admirers among the Vanir.”

“I didn’t do it to gain admirers.” She looked at him. “Not everyone calculates the outcome of an action before taking it, making moves like in some game.”

They were both quiet a long moment before Loki nodded slowly. “You’re right, of course.”

Sif leaned on Gylfi’s shoulder. “And sometimes calculation is what’s required,” she said after a moment, handing the reins off to a stablehand. “Come on. We’d better get inside and get trussed up for the feast. I’m altogether certain we’ll be more dressed than the food will be.”

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The rest of the trip was spent on a tour of some of the more important villages, along with ones that had suffered attacks by Surtur’s forces. Arla’s village in particular was one Sif wanted to see, and she spent the day not only talking to the villagers that were starting to come back, but helping out how she could.

It was interesting – everywhere they went, no matter how far-flung, people had seemed to hear about Arla and the parade, and while in the outlying villages there still seemed to be more wariness and less sympathy for Asgard (who were, after all, the ones who had soundly beat them in what was basically a war) than in the cities, there were those who would look at Sif, and their faces would be a little less hard. Not forgotten – never forgotten, she thought to herself. But perhaps a little closer to forgiveness than before. It seemed to be an annoyingly common thread in her life.

At the end of the visit they were seen back to the arrival site by Njord again, and after the appropriate ceremony was stood upon, he smiled at them.

“You both are unlike any Asgardians I have known,” he said. “You have changed many minds, the two of you.”

“We can be rather persuasive,” Sif told him, and only met Loki’s sideways glance with a pleased half-smirk. “It’s a learned skill.”
“It must be.” Njord put his fist over his heart and bowed. “It was truly a pleasure, my king, my queen. Vanheim is and will remain loyal.”

“That is good to know.” Loki and Sif mounted up and trotted back to the rest of their group, and as soon as they reached it the white light of the Bifrost swept over them, and took them back to Asgard.
Sif looked around her, and everything was grey.

Her boots crunched in the snow as she walked, the shattered halves of her shield falling from her arm along the way. Sif looked down at her hands and they were covered in bruises and cuts and burns, the palms and finger pads blistered. There was barely an inch of skin left untouched anywhere, even as her gaze traveled up her arms. Her armor was cracked, scraped and sliced, and as she walked sharp jabs of pain traveled up her body from more wounds she could not see. The world was as empty as she felt in her heart; the only company she had were the corpses, dusted with a layer of fresh-fallen—

No, it wasn’t snow. It was ash, and the sky was gray with smoke. Sif raised her eyes and saw that the palace poured smoke from fires that burned on every level. From a beacon, it had become a pyre. She sobbed, and wiped at the tears that didn’t fall with the back of one hand. She was dry, parched like a desert. She could not even cry for her home that was lost.

As she walked, it seemed there was less ash on the ground, and the corpses that before had been faceless and nondescript were now beginning to become distinct, take on identity. There was one of the soldiers who had ridden with her in the last battle, a young man with a young family (his wife had just had a daughter, she remembered); next to him was – another sob escaped her, the ash and the stone in her throat making it hard to breathe – Arla, her little body curled around a wooden sword. As she got closer to the palace, the faces became even more heartbreaking. Friends, comrades, family – she counted the Warriors Three among them, and felt her breath catch almost to the point of choking when she saw them slumped over together… and at the foot of the steps leading to the palace, Sif fell to her knees, unable to go any farther.

Frigga lay on the ash-dusted ground, her rich hair spread around her and her skirts torn and bloodied, a pool of red spreading out from a wound in her belly. There was a dagger in her hand. Sif brushed hair out of the face of the only mother she had truly known, leaving charcoal streaks behind. Beside her was the Allfather, Gungnir clasped in his hand. His throat had been cut, and gaped red, as red as —

“No,” Sif heard herself say, but it was as though she was speaking to herself through a long tunnel.
“No, no, no, it cannot be—“

Sprawled on the first step of the palace was Thor, in his armor. His cape was in tatters, singed and burned and torn. His neck bent at an unnatural angle and that had to be what killed him, though looking at the state of him through his armor it could have just as easily been anything else. Sif pulled his head and shoulders into her lap, fingers tangling in his blond hair as she pressed their foreheads together. Her dearest friend, the first one to accept her path, the first one she had ever bested in training, now seemed small and fragile and so un-Thor that it hurt her heart.

“Thor,” she whispered, grasping his face in her hands. “Thor, no, you must wake, you must…” but she knew it was hopeless. He had fought the longest, it seemed, the last one besides her left alive.

A sound, from up above, further up the steps – perhaps not the last one, after all. It took Sif a good long minute before she could grasp her glaive and haul herself to her feet, letting Thor’s head and shoulders gently slide to the stone again. There was only one figure left, a slender black-clothed one, and even as she put one foot before the other and climbed the stairs, careful not to slip on the ash, she knew who it would be.

Loki coughed again, the gold of his armor glinting in the dull light. It was only by the vibrant green and gold and the piercing blue irises she knew well that she recognized him, for there were horrible bags like bruises under his eyes and his skin seemed to stretch across his bones, tight as a drum and sallow. He was sprawled across the steps almost at the top, holding a strange spear in the crook of his elbow.

“I knew you’d come,” he said, and Sif shivered. His voice was not warm but as cold as she felt, but despite all that she knelt beside him anyway, brushing strands of long black hair out of his face with a fingertip. He watched her, madness in his eyes, mouth twisted into a rictus of pain. “I knew it would be you, Sif.”

“Why?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper, a flurry of snow in the blizzard. But there was no other sound than the crackling of the fires far above in the palace to drown her out; her voice seemed unnaturally loud, then. “Why, Loki? This was our home.”

“Your home,” he corrected, and coughed again. A bubble of blood popped in the corner of his mouth. “It never was mine, Sif. Dear, lovely, loyal, stupid Sif.”

“Shut up,” she rasped. “Quiet, Loki, your mouth has wrought enough…”

Loki laughed again. “More than I anticipated,” he said. “In all my planning, you know, I never saw this coming.”

“What else did you think would happen?”

For a moment, the madness in his eyes turned bleak. “I thought I would find a place,” he whispered. “I thought that if I could just fix everything, I could… but it seems that was foolish to dream. Now there can only be one end.”

Sif didn’t see him move – even while dying, he was faster than she was, and the only sensation was a sharp sting as the blade of the spear buried itself in her abdomen, slicing through her armor with ease. She stared down at him in surprise, expecting to see triumph on his face. But there was only supplication.

“You know how it has to be,” he said, and twisted the spear inside her. Strangely enough, the pain seemed distant.
Without hesitation, Sif drew a knife from her boot. Her fingers felt numb, cold – she was cold all over, she would never be warm again, all the life and light had been sucked from her very marrow and the last of it drained away as she put one bloody hand on his shoulder and drove the knife home into his heart. She should have felt something, but all was cold, and all was darkness.

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Sif woke with a shuddering gasp. Her whole body felt like ice, and she fought her way out of the furs, disoriented and panting, until she was sitting up against the carved headboard, the air cooling the sweat on her body. Her linen sleeping tunic stuck to her, and even the furs felt clammy and damp. She looked beside her, and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Loki was still there, still asleep, on his back with one arm flung out toward her spot in the bed. But for old scars his skin was unmarred, and Sif reached out and splayed her hand over his chest. Asgardian or Jotunn, his heartbeat was strong under her fingers. After a minute of watching him twitch in the grip of his own dreams (better than her own, Sif hoped), she rose and made her way to the bathing room to splash water on her face, blinking in the dim predawn light pushing its way around the heavy curtains.

She felt bone-weary. Between battles and diplomacy and all the rest, all Sif had wanted to do last night was crawl between the furs and go to sleep. *Maybe I'll be lucky,* she thought as she padded back toward the bed.

Sif paused, staring at the array of candles in one of the sconces. The one in the center was a time candle that burned at a steady rate, marked in eight sections along its length so that whoever lit it knew how long it had been burning. Sif had lit this one as they’d been getting into bed, and her own internal clock had figured dawn to be about the length of the candle away. But it had only burned just past the fourth mark.

*That can’t be right.* Sif’s brow furrowed and she changed direction, heading over to the curtains. *The light*... She narrowed her eyes and pushed the heavy cloth aside as she made her way toward the balcony.

Numb. Her hands and feet and heart went numb.

Smoke, lit from below by angry red flames hundreds of feet high, curled over the city. That had been the light she thought was predawn, but now she could smell the smoke and feel the heat even from so far away, could hear the roar of the fires and the screams of the terrified people fleeing the burning buildings and running about the city.

Asgard was burning. Her *home,* burning. Ash drifted down over her skin like snow, and for a horrible moment she thought she would look down at the palace steps and see Loki as he had been in her dream, long hair and pale skin and beyond her reach.

“No,” she whispered, not a warrior but a child, a frightened child. “No, no, that was just a dream, *this* is just a dream—“

But the pain when she dug her nails into her palms was too sharp to be ignored. This was real, and her mind changed gears, shifted again. Sif would never let her home burn as long as she drew breath to defend it. Tearing her eyes away from the city, she ran back to the bed, grabbing her husband by the shoulders and shaking him, shoving away the relief that it *was* him and not an illusion meant to fool her.

“Loki!” she hissed. “Loki, wake up!”

Whether it was the shaking or the tone of her voice, Loki was awake in seconds, sitting up and
reaching out to her. “Sif—Sif, calm down, tell me what’s going on—“

“Asgard is burning,” she said. He froze, eyes going wide before he waved a hand. The fire in the hearth sprung up, all the candles that had been extinguished the night before leaped to life, the braziers re-lit. His fingers went to her hair, and ash drifted down from it onto the furs.

Then Loki was moving, gently pushing her out of the way and brushing his hands over his body, his battle garb shimmering into existence on him. Sif was getting dressed herself, still pulling on pieces of armor as she and Loki left their rooms at a jog. Her shield and glaive were loose on her back, bouncing around and banging into her shoulders, trying to wrap her wrists was near impossible, but she ground her teeth and managed it.

“Taking too long,” Loki muttered, and grabbed her hand, pulling her against his chest. “Hold on tight, S—“

She’d seen Loki doing this trick before, disappearing in one place and reappearing in another in a flash of green-gold light, but she’d never been taken along with him. He often used it in a fight, leaving an illusion of himself behind and transporting himself away. It was completely unlike any other magical means of getting from one place to another, where there was still a sense of movement. One moment they were in the corridor two levels below their room; the next, the floor dropped out from under Sif’s feet and she grasped the leather straps of Loki’s jacket and held tight until light and sound erupted around them a heartbeat later and her boots scrabbled against flagstones.

They were in the courtyard, surrounded by soldiers and courtiers and servants, all yelling loud enough to drown out either Sif, when she started calling for order, or Loki when he did the same. Finally Loki raised his hand, and two glittering missiles shot out of it, arcing over their heads and dissipating just before they hit the raised faces in the back of the crowd.

“Now that you’ve all come to order,” he shouted (for the din from the rest of the city was still there), “Can someone, perhaps, hold their composure for long enough to tell your king and queen what in Hel’s name is going on? Why is my city on fire?”

That resulted in several people in the front pushing forward with different things to say, each one clamoring for attention over the rest, and Sif put herself between Loki and the advancing crowd, half of her glaive in hand. She pointed at the nearest, a soldier who had been in her training class and had taken his oaths with her. “You first,” she said. “Speak, and quickly!”

“Fire giants,” the soldier told her, snapping to attention immediately. “One of the city patrols saw them coming in through some kind of portal in the west garden district.” He paused, swallowing before continuing, “All in the patrol were slain, my queen, but they managed to take down a number of the attackers as well. But more came, and…” he trailed off. Sif reached down and put her hand on his shoulder, but it was Loki who spoke.

“You did well to bring us this news,” he said. “But there is no time. Take what soldiers are here and go make sure that the people fleeing find safety. Go! Now!”

The courtyard began to empty as soldiers raced to the stables to mount up, and a clamor rose again until Sif shouted for them all to shut up.

“People are going to start coming here for shelter,” she called. “Make sure we’re ready for them. Put them in the halls – in Gladsheim itself if you have to. Asgard protects its own! Edwik—“ she paused as the older warrior came down the stairs behind them with a clatter, remembering that he was one of those under suspicion, but then tilted her chin up a bit and pressed on. “—organize what soldiers you see fit to hunt down the fire giants who have made it into the city. Keep some alive if you can. I’m
He pushed through the sudden hive of activity as people swarmed, obeying his orders, and found Sif pulling her courser out of his stall. The horses in the royal wing of the stables were nervous, whinnying and tossing their heads over their stall doors. The smoke in the air frightened them, and the trumpeting of Sleipnir didn’t help the fact the warhorses all had their blood up. He paused by the Allfather’s horse, reaching out to stroke his muzzle with a gloved hand. For a moment the stallion calmed, but when Loki walked away, he heard several very sharp bangs against the stall door.

That one never likes being left behind when there’s a battle, Loki thought to himself, pulling Gylfi’s bridle off its peg and letting Sif slip the bit into the horse’s mouth and followed as she tugged him over to the mounting block and vaulted on easily, helping Loki up behind her.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she nudged their horse into a trot out of the stables, then into a gallop. Loki wrapped his arms around her armor-clad stomach and put his mouth close to her ear so he didn’t have to yell over the wind of their passing.

“If there’s a portal letting fire giants into Asgard we have to close it,” he said. “I’m the only one skilled enough in magic to do it. Get me there and for the love of all things sacred, keep me undisturbed while I work.”

People got out of the way when they saw Gylfi galloping flat-out toward them with the king and queen upon him. There wasn’t any time or need to tell them to make way, and Loki didn’t look to see what the expressions of the people they passed were. He was too busy remembering everything he’d ever read about portals, gateways to other realms that didn’t depend on the Bifrost’s magic. He used them, certainly – they made sneaking around rather easy – and even the basic teleportation used the shadowy paths to an extent, but Surtur’s magic was different, darker than the blackest curse that Loki knew. It would leave behind a taint that was basically a crack in the door. Once opened, if improperly closed it would be much easier to reopen. He would have to be careful.

They sped through the dark streets, clattering down side alleys if a main road was blocked or full of traffic, but Gylfi was swift, swift enough so that they nearly ran down the first set of fire giants they encountered. Loki nearly slid off when her stallion stopped so abruptly he reared up, but Sif’s legs were like a steel band around her mount and she held them on with sheer strength alone. In the light, he could barely see her face in profile, lips pulled back and teeth bared.

“Take the reins,” she hissed, “This part is my skill.”

He was still tightening up his grip when she kicked her horse’s sides, and with a whinny, Gylfi’s ears flattened and he charged forward. Steel flashed in Sif’s hand – the two unconnected swords that made up her glaive – and as they rode into the middle of the group she swung them, her throat singing with her battle cries as the sharp blades cut through the midsections of the fire giants they passed, through the arms and legs and whatever else she could reach. Screams of pain and indignation followed in their wake, and as Sif took the reins again, Loki looked behind them to see most of the group of giants on the ground, and those that weren’t already there well on their way.

“Not bad,” he told her. Sif made no reply, but the snarl her mouth had been set in was now something more self-satisfied.
A few minutes later they encountered a group of soldiers guiding citizens back toward safety. Loki squeezed Sif’s arm and she pulled Gylfi to a halt beside one of them.

“Do you know where they’re coming in at?” Loki asked. The soldier, realizing who it was, made a hasty bow before answering.

“Beyond the market wall, my king!” he called, pointing toward a gracefully-curved, golden wall that shimmered in the flames and heat. “But there’s fire everywhere and giants where there’s not, we can’t get to the portal to keep it blocked!”

“Leave that to us,” Sif said. “Keep on as you are.”

The last few minutes of their ride turned into a hellish nightmare of flame and screams and burning buildings. Gylfi was trained well, but he still pranced and rolled his eyes whenever debris fell nearby, or whenever they skidded into a group of fire giants. Loki helped out with his magic, one arm locked around Sif to keep from sliding off and the other throwing frozen spells as fast as he could conjure them, green and gold streaking outward carried by his tiny silver knives.

When they were close – one street over, near enough to hear the roar of the open portal – Loki glanced at his hand. It was blue to the wrist, the paler designs showing up starkly. He quickly tucked it between himself and Sif, and consciously did not throw spells involving ice anymore. He knew spells that were just as deadly, without the side effects and that did not make him have to confront this part of himself just yet.

Then they broke free of a pack and were before the portal. It was ugly and inelegant, not at all like the kind of thing the Bifrost could create. This close, the noise of it was like a torrent of water – or maybe, more appropriately, like a pillar of flame, for that was what it resembled, a great burning portal in the middle of the street between the entryways to two houses. The paving stones were blackened in front of it, and when Loki slid off Gylfi’s back he could feel the heat through the soles of his boots. The wind of it tore at his clothes, sending his mail skirt slapping against his legs.

“Can you close it?” Sif shouted, leaning over and trying to control her horse at the same time. Loki took a deep breath and let it out, turning to give her one of his trickster’s grins.

“Have a little more faith!”

To his pleasure, Sif smiled grimly and tightened her grip on the reins. “If any come this way I shall hold them off!” she told him.

Loki blocked out the sound of the horse’s hooves clattering back and forth on the stone and focused only on the portal, turning his magic on it and weaving spells of detection, making probes and feelers and tendrils and sending them in. Immediately he felt himself break into a sweat – this was Surtur’s magic, steeped in fire, and it knew when it was faced with its opposite.

"Think, Loki," he told himself, getting a grasp on the sudden apprehension. Every problem has a solution. This one is no different. Now… what do we know about portals?

His feelers had encountered resistance and mercilessly Loki poured magic into them, looking for the cracks, the parts of the portal where his magic could worm its way in and spread and break the connection. A portal needed a power source – magical, probably, in this case – and a place to go. A destination and an origin point. It needed stability. He couldn’t do anything about the origin point, so he set that aside, and instead focused on finding weaknesses in the power keeping it open and keeping it stable, more toward the latter. Destabilize the portal and it would collapse in on itself.
The spells holding it were old and intricate, but Loki worried at them like a dog with a bone, unraveling them bit by agonizing bit, one part at a time. It was frustrating, but he made himself remain calm as he worked, told himself not to lose his temper every time he hit a dead end in his work, pushing ever onward toward the core of it. The problem was that as fast as he was undoing it he could almost feel Surtur’s will (for he was undoubtedly the one working this magic on the other side) working against him. In his mind’s eye Loki could see Surtur putting things back together as fast as Loki could take them apart. He needed to win this, for it was as much a contest of wills as it was a contest of magic, and though he had both in spades, Surtur had thousands of years on him.

So he ground his teeth and threw himself, everything he had, into the unraveling. A thousand hands worked a thousand knots in a thousand ways, until one of them undid a knot. Then they would push inside, under that layer.

_I will do it, _Loki told himself. _I will make this close._

He felt something snap at last, pulled out an end of the tangle, and smiled.

From there it came faster and faster. Dimly behind him he could hear the sounds of fighting, the shouts of Sif and others around her. Friend or foe, it didn’t matter. He was absorbed in this power, glaring into the heart of the portal as though it could swallow all his wrongs.

_Join me._

Loki started, almost lost the end of the spell he’d been unraveling. The voice had not come from outside but from within his own head. Looking into the portal, it seemed in the midst of the flames he could see two points that hovered still – a pair of eyes, watching him calculatedly.

_You want to prove yourself a worthy leader_, Surtur mused. _You want the power to show everyone that you aren’t just a pretender, that you have as much right to be where you are as your dear wayward brother, that you’re not just a second son who got lucky… or who played his cards right and ended up with exactly what he wanted. Am I wrong?_

He made no reply, grinding his teeth and continuing to pull through the spells keeping the portal open. Already the flames within seemed to whip about uncertainly, as though instead of one wind blowing from one end to the next there were crosswinds, eddies that hadn’t been there before. He tried to keep his concentration, to focus on the task at hand and control the grasping fingers of his magic.

But Surtur wasn’t so easily repelled.

_You just have to do one thing for me_, he told Loki, and then he showed him.

Images flashed through Loki’s mind and his grip on his magic nearly slipped as they spun through rapidly, almost too fast for him to recall or understand. But he did see them, and he did understand, and the understanding made icy fear trickle down his back. Surtur laughed in his head, and the images kept coming and coming, and—

Loki slammed his magic into the portal, snapping the last frayed strands of spellwork at once, and sending the rest as a spear of will shooting through it as it closed. He barely registered Surtur’s mental roar of indignation before the portal snapped shut in front of him in a bright flare that sent a rush of uncomfortable heat over him and despite that he’d braced himself for it, sent him skidding.

Now that the noise of the portal was gone, normal sounds slowly came filtering back in. The shouts of citizens were fainter, farther away, but battle still rung out close. He could hear the clatter of Gylfi’s hooves on stone, hear Sif shouting for him, asking him if it was done. He couldn’t muster the energy to call back to her, and his voice came out as little more than a croak when he tried. His throat
felt singed, sore, as though he’d been screaming and screaming for hours. Blackness was creeping in at the edges of his vision, and despite everything, he welcomed it. It felt… peaceful. Cool. Somewhere he could rest.

Loki barely registered the hands grasping his forearms before the last points of light in his vision faded and the darkness overcame him.

*

Parts of the city still smoldered, but on the shores of the rim sea, new fires were lit.

It was a fitting day for a funeral, Loki thought. Or ten funerals, or twenty, or fifty. Their losses had actually been astonishingly low – most citizens escaped, though many were injured, and it was the same among the soldiers – but others had lost their lives, and the rare fog seemed a fitting accompaniment for the subdued mood. They spoke often of glorifying death in battle, and the sages spoke their words about the spirits of the fallen going to Valhalla to await the end of days, but Loki thought much of that to be sentimental. Hel took what souls she wanted, and the rest – well, who could say that a dishonorable man killed in battle had more right to be in Valhalla than an honorable man who died a coward’s death?

The wind sliced through the heavily embroidered dark green tunic that he wore, and beside him Sif had her jacket on along with her armor. As commanding officer she had been able to eschew mourning garb, but her armor had been polished to a high gleam, and her jacket was the fine fur-trimmed emerald one rather than her usual grey.

The sages finished their words; two guards handed Sif and Loki a torch each, and wordlessly they split and began lighting the funerary boats, touching the flames to the oil-soaked wood and continuing on. Others behind them pushed the boats into the water as they lit, and when they joined again in the center they turned and watched the ships be pulled into the current that would take them over the edge of the realm.

Loki felt Sif’s fingers brush the back of his hand as they stared out at the flames, and took a deep breath. Their day was not yet done, and he felt exhausted.

*

“So you are recovered?”

“Enough that I will not strain myself overmuch with magic now,” Loki replied as they rode slowly back through the streets toward the palace.

“I have never seen you collapse from using magic before.”

“I have never expended so much at once before. It usually comes out more slowly, released in bursts with periods of rest between. But all magic comes with a price.” Loki studied the mane of his house a moment. “And I used much of my available energy closing that portal. It was no easy thing, Sif.”

“I thought you were dying. You looked so wan when we got you back to bed, and I thought—” Sif stopped herself there and looked down at her hands, and Loki wished he was close enough so that he could reach out and touch her. She seemed to like that, after the battle high had faded and all matters were taken care of. She would touch him, just small brushes now and then. He didn’t mind it, if it calmed her thoughts. “There is still much I want you with me for.”

He smiled, glad their guards were riding a perimeter rather than pressing close. “It’ll take a lot more than that to kill me, Sif.”
“Like questioning the giants we captured after the portal closed?”

“Yes, that might well kill me, but in an entirely different manner.”

“You’ll have no need of your magic.” Sif pressed her lips together, and her eyes became hard. “They killed too many – they burned too much of Asgard. I have several sharp, pointy objects ready to cut their threads.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Loki murmured, but he felt apprehensive. The images Surtur had shown him stuck in his mind, and while he hoped they weren’t true, while he hoped it was some trick of the demon, he became more and more certain the more he thought on it that they suddenly had a much greater problem.

* 

There was no safe way to detain a fire giant. Like the denizens of Jotunheim, they had powerful magic, and could usually slip almost any bond; they were large, and did not generally fit in most cells designed for Asgardian use. There were, however, secure places in the belly of the palace where they could be held, cells intended for housing Jotun prisoners of war and laid about with spells of holding, and it was there that Sif and Loki went after changing from their funeral garb.

“I did not even know this existed,” Sif murmured as they descended another set of stairs. The shaft leading down to the cell level was long and the Allfather had forbidden the use of magical lifts here, and while Loki normally would have simply transported them to the bottom with his own abilities, his magic was still not fully recovered from closing the portal.

“There’s little reason to advertise that the crown has a detention section for those of a realm we supposedly have a treaty with,” Loki replied. “Though it’s lucky we do. I imagine without these we’d have no one to question, and this kind of information is important, if it’s truthful.”

Sif looked over at him as their boots echoed on the steps. They were close to the bottom now, but they still had several flights to go. “Something weighs on your mind.”

“I am only weary.”

“No. It’s not that.” Her eyes flashed. “Don’t try to lie to me, I can tell when you are troubled.”

“I am always troubled, Sif. It’s the nature of being king.” Loki sighed. “Ask me again later, when we are finished here.”

Sif made a disapproving noise but seemed to accept it even so, though he could see her fingers tighten into a fist briefly. He didn’t like doing this to her – not anymore – but he also didn’t know how to begin to tell her of what Surtur had shown him when he was closing the portal. He didn’t know how to say it without arousing suspicion.

His thoughts were cut short by their boots hitting the magically-reinforced stone floor of the cell level. Noises seemed too amplified in the space, and when Loki looked behind him all he saw was a blank wall. Part of the Allfather’s magic, to confuse escapees. To either side, long hallways of cells seemed to stretch on, all with fire giants visible. Those were a ruse – the magic copied the appearance of whatever was in any one of the real cells and applied it to the rest, made them think the cells went on deep into the bedrock of the realm when in fact the whole thing was a narrow cave.

“This way, Your Majesties,” one of the guards said, and led them to one of the cells. “This one’s agreed to talk.”
The fire giant inside was leaning against the back wall, arms and legs in shackles. The guard slid the bars open to let Loki and Sif inside, and then stood in the opening, his hand on his sword. Sif’s face was set in an expression of distaste. Loki kept his own face carefully neutral, but the giant had probably expected as much.

“The king and queen themselves,” the giant said. “Things must be desperate.”

“Not as desperate as you would think,” Sif retorted, her eyes narrow. “Your assault on Asgard failed, after all.”

“Our first assault.” The giant grinned toothily, and Loki forced himself not to let his lip curl in distaste. “Your little trickster king might have stopped the one portal and angered the great Lord of Flames, but… well, he’s just an Asgardian, and we’re of Muspelheim. Fire burns, little godlings.”

Sif started forward but it was Loki who spoke up. “We know you’re a general in Surtur’s army, Taneg of the northern reaches,” Loki said, putting a quelling hand on Sif’s arm and, at the same time, pulling a scroll case out of his magical storage. Using magic was like poking a bruise, but Loki endured it. “We are willing to offer you a deal – a very generous one, might I add – if you answer our questions.”

Taneg eyed the scroll case. “What’s that?”

“A writ, signed and sealed by myself, that informs the one reading it of this deal I speak of,” Loki answered. “I offer you free passage to another realm – I will even escort you to the Observatory myself, I and my lovely queen – if you but answer a few of my questions. I give you my word on this.”

“Your word’s rather notorious in the Nine Realms, Loki Snaketongue. Why should I trust that you’ll do what you say you will? How do I know you won’t just let your pet Heimdall drop me right into Surtur’s lap, eh?”

Loki put his hand on his chest. “My word is my bond, as king,” he said. “If I say I offer you passage from Asgard, then as king of this realm I am honor-bound to see it through.”

The giant seemed to consider this for a moment, then grinned again. Loki wished he wouldn’t. “I’ll take your deal, then,” Taneg said. “Ask away, trickster.”

“How did your master manage to open a portal into Asgard?” That was something that had weighed on Loki’s mind. There were ancient spells of protection upon the realm that prevented something like this from happening. He was able to slip in and out along the branches of Yggdrasil, but transporting one person along a tiny route between the realms was another matter entirely from establishing and maintaining a portal.

“Had his little helper here place some kind of enchanted stones that anchored it when the Lord of Flames opened it here. Don’t know much more than that.”

“Do you know who this little helper is?” Sif demanded. Taneg leered at her.

“Said I’d answer the king, not you, some upjumped girl playing with pointy things.”

Loki rolled his eyes theatrically and pulled Sif back again. “Who is Surtur’s contact here?” he asked.

“Don’t know that either. Only ever seen him hooded and cloaked.”

That line of questioning clearly wasn’t going anywhere. Loki moved on to the next thing. “What is it
that Surtur wants? What’s he after here?”

“Here?” Taneg laughed, and it sounded awful and gravelly. “He only wants to see Asgard burn. Loot the palace, kill you lot, and burn the rest to the ground. He’s got no use for any of you.”

“Imaginative,” Sif said, but her voice was tight. She had told Loki about her dream, and about how she had thought it was coming true for a moment when she’d first seen the city in flames.

“Never asked if it was original.” Taneg turned his red eyes back to Loki. “Nah, he wants nothing with Asgard except to see it scoured off Yggdrasil entirely. He’s got his sights set a little higher than that.”

“Oh?”

“Say Surtur knew of something that would tip the scales in his balance, even beyond all the little toys the Allfather stashed away in his box. Say he even knew where it was.” Taneg leaned forward as far as the shackles chaining him to the wall would allow. “Why be a power in the realms when you could be the power?”

Sif looked confused, but Loki had to work to keep his composure. He had seen it, in the vision Surtur had forced on him, but he had hoped… “I didn’t know that fire giants were capable of being obtuse.”

“Don’t think you Asgardians have that cornered. I’m a wit, myself.”

“Clearly.”

“You know what I mean, trickster.” Taneg’s grin seemed fit to split his face. “You know what it is I’m talking about. The toy Odin lost.”

Sif had her hand around her glaive’s hilt. “What’s he talking about?”

“The Tesseract, idiot girl. One of the things left from the making of the realms.”

Sif looked at Loki uncertainly, but Loki kept his eyes on Taneg. “If the Allfather lost it, I doubt Surtur will be the one to find it.”

“Oh, he’s close, boy. He knows where it is – or well, I think he has an idea, at least – and as soon as it makes itself known, he’s going to swoop in and grab it. And then nobody’s going to stop him.” Taneg went very still for a moment, as though he was sizing up Loki. “He told us a few things before we left, you know. Said that we ought to extend you an invitation to Muspelheim if we came across you. Said you’d be welcome. Surtur knows his own kind.”

“Surtur doesn’t, if he thinks that’s what I am,” Loki said, and regretted the snap he let into his voice. “When does he plan to make his move to get the Tesseract?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Midgard, somewhere. Pretty sure any one of us could just reach down and grab it from the mortals, eh? There’s nothing to it. They’ve got nobody to protect them, since you lot left.”

“What’s he plan to do with it?”

“How should I know?”
Loki seemed to have gotten himself back under control, and regarded Taneg coolly for a moment before gesturing to the guard. “Unlock him from the wall. Sif, to one side, please. I will walk beside our friend here.”

He turned on his heel and left the cell while the guard did as he was asked. Sif’s eyes flicked from the giant to Loki and back, but her stance was relaxed if her face was not. Taneg swaggered out of the cell, smirking triumphantly.

“You Asgardians are pretty great, though,” he said. Loki smiled thinly. “Your compliments are appreciated. Come, I said I would take you to the Observatory myself and see you off.”

He gathered his magic (that soreness again but he ignored it) and reached out to grasp Sif’s arm and Taneg’s chain, and in the next breath they were standing on the bridge just outside the Observatory. Heimdall’s face was impassive, but his eyelids flickered when he saw Taneg standing there, with Loki holding the giant’s chain.

When they stood before the departure point, Loki turned to look at Taneg. “Think carefully,” he said. “Anything you might want me to know before I send you on your way?”

Taneg grinned. “You’re fucked like a dog,” he said. “Nothing’s going to stop Surtur. I guess allying with him might help, but, well… you know all about lying, don’t you, Liesmith?”

Loki’s smile was pointed, his eyes hard. “I do know a thing or two about lying, Taneg.” He waved a hand and the shackles undid themselves and vanished, and he handed over the scroll case.

“Funny, because you’ve done naught but keep your word.”

“Haven’t I?” Loki gestured to Sif and they stepped up onto the pedestal with Heimdall. “Open the Bifrost. You know where we agreed.”

Heimdall regarded Loki a long moment, then nodded and slid his sword into the pedestal. The moment the Bifrost opened before them, a blast of heat came out of it, and Taneg roared to see that the portal was not blue or green or any color associated with one of the finer realms or their attendant outposts, but the fiery red of the flame worlds – Muspelheim, Nidavellr – and there was no way Loki was angering the dwarves by sending him to Nidavellr.

“Muspelheim! You bastard, you gave me your word!”

Loki leaned forward, his eyes a very bright blue in the light. “I lied,” he said. “Or to be more precise, I didn’t tell the truth.” He straightened, crossing his arms over his armor-clad chest. “I said passage from Asgard, and promised not to drop you in Surtur’s lap. I think Heimdall is good enough not to do that.”

Taneg’s reply was lost as he was sucked into the Bifrost, and a moment later, the doorway closed. Loki’s head throbbed as it began to spool down, and though he tried not to, he stumbled as they descended the pedestal, and it was only Sif’s quick reflexes that kept him from falling.

_Thrice-cursed Surtur_, Loki snarled mentally as Sif called for her horse. _A few basic spells and I’m like a novice again. It will be another day at least until I’m back to anywhere near normal strength._

While they were mounting up, Loki turned and looked over his shoulder at Heimdall. “Find my brother,” he instructed, the words bitter in his mouth. “Find Thor.”
Heimdall inclined his head slightly before replying.

“It will be done, my king.”

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They were all silent as they sat around the table. Loki had spent the better part of the afternoon sweeping through the libraries of the palace and sending others for books outside, and holed up in his study reading them so fast Sif had wondered if he was actually absorbing any of the information. More disconcerting, what he’d learned – or failed to learn, maybe – had made him short, snapping at her and anyone else who did something he disliked. Irritated, Sif had retreated to one of the training yards and taken out her frustrations on a very unfortunate dummy, until a servant had appeared saying she was needed.

A messenger bearing Heimdall’s sigil entered the room and crossed to Loki, handing him a folded piece of parchment and leaning over to speak into his ear. Loki glanced over sharply.

“Truly?”

The messenger nodded. “My lord Heimdall swears it.”

“That it must be.” Loki sighed and broke the seal on the parchment, reading its contents quickly before shoving it into a brazier. “You’re dismissed.”

Sif raised an eyebrow at him and he sighed, leaning forward. “I have shared with you all the information that the fire giant Taneg gave me. No doubt he’s getting his due in Muspelheim right now, I cannot imagine Surtur suffers traitors, but nonetheless what he has told us has been verified, and is of the most urgent and secret nature.”

They all remained silent, waiting for Loki to continue. “Surtur means to recover an ancient treasure of the Allfather’s, a powerful magic cube known as the Tesseract. With it he can stand unopposed by any of the realms, for none – not even Asgard – possess the power to stop anyone who can understand and wield the power of this artifact. He means to raze our realm to the ground and subjugate the rest under his power.”

Everyone looked pale. “Where is the Tesseract now?” one of the advisors asked.

“On Midgard,” Loki replied. “In the possession of mortals who do not understand its potential. My…” he could not hide the slight downturn of his mouth “…my brother is among these mortals.”

“Then Thor guards it?”

“Thor will not be enough to guard it. We must recover it,” a second minister cut in. “It belongs in the vault beside the Allfather’s other treasures.”

“It does. Somewhere where it is out of reach of those who would use it against us.”

“We must get to it quickly, before Surtur has a chance to recover it before us.”

“Have Thor return it to us!”

“He can fight for us as well – Surtur will not give up so easily, surely, and it would do this realm well to see its prince returned – meaning no disrespect to you, my lord—but we should send an envoy right away to these mortals with the cube.”
Loki held up a hand and they all went quiet. Sif saw how his jaw worked, how he went tight around the eyes, and knew that all this was difficult for him to hear. He had told her before that always being second to Thor had taken its toll. She could not imagine what it was like hearing it still even when he was king.

“I intend to recover the cube – and to bring my brother back to Asgard to aid in its defense, if he can come,” and Sif heard the hesitance in that, even if the others did not. “But this is too important a task for an envoy. I mean to go myself.”

“But my king—“

“Surely it’s too dangerous—“

“After an attack on the city, you cannot just—“

“I am king,” Loki snapped, and they all quieted again. “I am able to make this decision without needing the approval of the council in times of war. And in any case,” he glanced around the table, and smiled in a way that suddenly made Sif very nervous. It meant Loki was up to something, that he aimed to cause trouble, and that nobody was going to like it.

His eyes settled on her. “I won’t be going alone.”

* 

“For someone with such a mind for diplomacy, you certainly know how to rouse ire in the greatest number of people at once.”

They weren’t packing as heavily as they had for Vanaheim – this wasn’t as much of a diplomatic trip as that one had been, they weren’t representing Asgard, they weren’t visiting foreign dignitaries. But Loki was examining the spines and covers of some of his books, and making them vanish or putting others away. He looked drawn, and Sif worried for him.

“You should not be using your magic,” she said.

“These are but simple things.”

“You are not at your full strength.”

“I am fine.”

“You’re pushing yourself, you always tell me to be careful when I am healing and yet you—“

“Sif!” He spun, and she snapped her mouth shut but glared at him defiantly, kicking her leg up onto a seat to stick a knife in her boot. Loki took a breath and passed a hand over his face, leaning on the table. He seemed very vulnerable in that moment, and she sighed, her face softening, but held her ground.

“I have to do this,” Loki said, insistent. “If I can do this – if I can retrieve the Tesseract, if I can stop Surtur – Stars, even if I bring back Thor – I can prove that I do belong where I am. That I am as much a citizen of Asgard as they are. That I—“

He cut off, but Sif knew what he was going to say, for she had thought it often herself. That he was good enough, that he had paid his dues and earned his rank, rather than simply coasting along to it. That for all his trickery and his magic and his strange behavior, he belonged. She walked over slowly, putting her hands on his chest, and after a moment he relented and slid his own up her bare
arms, the touch light. They were both quiet, the strain of the situation forcing even Loki’s words away from him.

“You’ll prove nothing if you collapse from exhaustion,” she told him at last. “And in all that leather and metal you insist on wearing, you’re altogether too bulky to carry. Consider that.”

“I suppose you may have a point,” Loki muttered, but it wasn’t until Sif pressed a kiss to his cheek that he sighed and relaxed a bit. Their fingers brushed as she pulled away to keep readying herself.

“Admitting someone else is right?” she said over her shoulder. “Ragnarok must be approaching.”

“Don’t even jest,” Loki replied. “I simply admitted I might be wrong.” But the tension in the room had eased, something Sif was very glad for. Her stomach was knotted enough, and her mind was unfocused, and as they rode out from the palace they were both silent and lost in their thoughts.

* 

“Do you know where to put us?” Loki asked for the third time. The irritation was starting to show even on Heimdall’s face.

“Do you doubt my ability?” he rumbled. Sif rolled her eyes and simply moved into position, checking to make sure her shield and glaive were secure on her back.

Loki took a breath and stepped up beside her, and they waited together as the machinery hummed, spinning up to speed around them. Sif looked over at him.

“So what was it that the messenger told you earlier?” she asked.

Loki stared straight ahead. “I know who our spy is.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone to do anything about it?”

“There’s nothing to be done right now beyond what I’ve already laid out and put in motion. It will keep until our return.”

Sif looked at him uncertainly but Loki caught her eye, smiling a bit as the light grew steadily around them. “Trust me, Sif,” he said. “I know what I’m doing.”

She gave him a look but turned to face the portal again. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” she muttered.

Then the Bifrost grabbed them and pulled, and they were rocketing onward, caught in its light, until their boots hit ground and the wind of the Bifrost’s passage kicked up a cloud of reddish dust that settled quickly. When it did, it revealed people standing in a half-circle around them – a woman holding some kind of device and looking completely dumbstruck, a being entirely encased in red and gold armor, several more in uniforms with strange weapons pointed at them, an archer with an arrow nocked and ready to loose, and—

“Brother,” Loki said, voice as smooth as he could make it. “It’s so good to see you again.”
One last note about the timeline: this chapter catches the Midgard Club up to where things stand at the end of the last chapter. I hope this doesn't confuse anyone!

*chiasmata*; thought to be the points where two homologous non-sister chromatids exchange genetic material during chromosomal crossover in meiosis.

Coulson swiped his ID card and walked onto the command deck, pausing a moment by the door to hold onto a railing as the helicarrier settled into the waters of the Pacific Ocean. Once they were down he proceeded, listening to the chatter from the various stations; it seemed that they were about two hundred miles off the coast of Baja California, southwest of Albuquerque. Coulson knew Fury wasn’t happy about having to put down in the water at all, let alone be so far away from where Dr. Foster was conducting her research, but they couldn’t keep flying in circles around the city. Someone would have noticed something, and though there were contingencies, it had long been decided by the governing council that inconvenience was preferable to something like the helicarrier becoming public knowledge.

Fury was standing on the glass-floored forward deck, looking out ahead of them as the propellers engaged and the helicarrier began to move ponderously through the water. Coulson handed him the tablet and took a step back. “Update from Albuquerque HQ,” he said. “From what I can understand, Dr. Foster is ready to begin testing.”

Fury scrolled through the dense equations and skimmed the little summary that Jane (or more likely her assistant) included with her work. “Is she sure?”

“I don’t think she or anyone else knows, sir. But if she says her math is sound, I don’t have any grounds to argue with her.”

“Did she run it by anyone else outside?”

“Dr. Selvig, of course, but he’s been kept in the loop this whole time because of...” Coulson trailed off at a look from Fury, and took a deep breath. “Nobody else outside of SHIELD employ.”

Fury tapped a few icons on the tablet and the display changed. “Romanoff’s reported in?”

“She’ll be ready for extraction in a few days. Do you want her reassigned to Selvig now or later?”

“Never, I’ll have something else for her to do. Keep an eye on Selvig, but not too close, and don’t move him to Albuquerque. I don’t want anyone getting funny ideas.” Fury passed a hand over his face, thinking. “And round up Stark. If she’s going to begin testing with that thing, I want someone other than just Barton there in case things go sideways. And things *always* go sideways.”

Coulson managed to keep the preemptive exasperation off his face. Dealing with Stark always threatened to break his careful cool, and it was usually only with the intervention of Pepper that anything got done. But an order was an order. “You want him sent to Albuquerque, sir?”

“If anyone can keep up with Dr. Foster, it’s Stark.” Fury went to one of the displays and plugged the
tablet in, fingers flying over the windows that appeared for a few minutes before he tapped out a
command and disconnected it again, handing it back to Coulson. “Get this briefing packet to him and
don’t leave him alone until you make damn sure he’s on his way.”

Coulson nodded in understanding and left the command deck, already speaking into his earpiece to
request a quinjet be ready on the flight deck. By the time he reached the outer door, they’d be ready
to go.

*

“Tony—“

“Not listening.”

“Tony—”

“I’m not going to go build sandcastles for SHIELD. Do you know what desert air does to my skin?
Forget it.”

Coulson kept his face impassive. Tony Stark was one of the few people anywhere to break his cool,
but perhaps luckily, he’d come at a time when Pepper was with him in the penthouse of the half-
finished Stark Tower. Construction materials were everywhere, and Tony’s interactive blueprints
were spread out across a workbench, three seats, and the floor, but the man was carrying on as
though they were in his Malibu mansion. Thankfully, Pepper was here to both referee and convince
Tony that going to New Mexico to babysit a glowing cube, a Norse god sans divinity, and a very
headstrong astrophysicist was not only a good idea, but his idea in the first place. She had often said,
when they chatted over coffee, that that was most often the secret to convincing Tony to do anything.

“This is serious, Tony,” Pepper was saying. It was in a low whisper, but the acoustics of the room
carried her voice back to Coulson. “I’ve got business to take care of at the California facility
anyway.”

Tony prodded at some of the icons on the tablet Pepper had shoved into his hands desultorily. “I
could come with you.”

Though Coulson pulled out his phone at that moment and pretended to be very interested in scrolling
through his contacts, he could almost see Pepper’s face when she spoke next. It would be that sort of
part-motherly, part-exasperated, part-affectionate look that she seemed to turn on Tony a lot. Despite
that it seemed like Pepper herded the man around like a sheepdog, Coulson knew them well enough
to know it was simply how they had gotten their relationship to work.

“Tony,” Pepper said patiently, “When have you ever gone on a facilities tour?”

“Um, let me think… never?”

“That’s right.”

“I could, you know, start.”

Pepper gave him a little smile and patted his arm. “No, you couldn’t. And you aren’t going to,
because your brain is needed in New Mexico.”

“You know this how?”

“Just look over her equations,” Pepper told him, and came back over to where Coulson was busily
examining a decorative ficus by the elevator.

“Give it a few minutes,” she whispered. “I’m sorry again about the mess.”

“I’ve seen worse.” They shared a look as they both, apparently, thought back to Tony’s disastrous birthday party at his house in Malibu. “How’s construction going?”

“We’re nearly done,” Pepper replied, and there was no small hint of pride in her voice. “Tony would start testing the new reactor tomorrow if I let him outpace work, but our contractors think that everything will be finalized in about a month. Stark Tower will be the first building of its size to draw power from a source that is completely emission-free and sustainable.”

“Congratulations,” Coulson told her, and meant it. Professional didn’t have to mean cold and unfeeling, after all, and he respected Pepper – not just for being able to wrangle Tony, but for having a cool head for business. Tony hadn’t been wrong to make her CEO.

“How about you? How’s—Eli, was it? The cellist?”

“Eli’s fine. The symphony in Portland—“

“Pepper!”

To her credit, there wasn’t even a hint of a ‘told-you-so’ look on Pepper’s face before she turned. “What is it, Tony?”

“I don’t know how people function, Pepper. I don’t understand how they can live.”

“I know.” She gave Coulson a look over her shoulder. “It’s a mystery, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know how this woman thinks she’s going to channel the power of this thing with any kind of stability – I don’t think she knows. She’s just going to press the big damn red button.”

“I’m sure Dr. Foster has rechecked her equations several times before telling us she’s ready to begin the test phase,” Coulson said.

Tony touched several windows on the tablet and then made a sweeping gesture with his hands, and various strings of equations and information on the Tesseract appeared as holographic displays across several surfaces and dangling from what Coulson had thought were desk lamps. “Just look at these. I can come up with neater proofs in my sleep. A child could do better.”

“I’m sure they could, Tony. But we trust Dr. Foster’s word on her preparedness—“

“Well, don’t. And don’t touch that Tessewhatever—“

“Tesseract.”

“—until I’ve had a chance to go over these with her, because it’s like she just took chunks of math and plopped them down however she liked—“

“I’ll have them get the quinjet prepared,” Coulson began telling Pepper, but Tony spun around and pointed at them.

“No, you’re flying with me,” he said. “I am not traveling across the country in one of those paramilitary sardine cans you call a jet. Besides, I don’t want to have to pay for checked baggage.” He grinned. “And you know I never travel light.”
Tony stalked off with the tablet in one hand, muttering over the physics still, and Pepper turned back to Coulson with a smile.

“Good luck,” she said. “Return him in one piece, please.”

“It’s Albuquerque,” Coulson replied. “It’s pretty quiet out there. I’m sure he’ll be back before you know it.”

*

The only plane Thor had ever been on had been the jet that brought him here from Puente Antiguo, so when the brilliantly white Gulfstream with the Stark Industries logo on the tail taxied up to the building they were all standing outside, Thor made sure that he was right there with Jane and the others waiting for the door to open. Midgard truly had some strange and fascinating magic at its disposal, but perhaps the true sorcery was how nobody seemed as entranced about it as he was.

“Did they really have to pull me away for this?” Jane was muttering to the AIC Coulson had left in charge. “I’m making the last preparations for our initial field tests, it’s very delicate machinery and the math needs to be perfect, and I’m sorry, but I’ve heard of Mr. Stark’s reputation, and—”

“I assure you we’ll try to make it so his abrasiveness is channeled into something productive,” the AIC said, but it didn’t sound like he believed it. Centuries with Loki had made it so even Thor knew when something was an obvious half-truth, but though he drew his brows down in a line he kept his teeth together. Before, he would have already declared himself against this Stark, but now he thought it better not to make a hasty call and alienate the man before he had a chance to pass judgment.

Jane didn’t seem too impressed, even so. “If he tries to… to meddle with my work…”

“Jane,” Darcy said from behind them both. “It’ll be fine. You’ll put on your bossy pants and boss the richest man in the world around. It’ll be great.”

Thor gave her a look. “Bossy pants?”

Darcy opened her mouth to say something, but then her jaw simply dropped, and she pointed. “Ohmigod. That’s him.”

Thor looked back at the plane and sure enough, a man in a suit was coming down the stairs from the plane, followed closely by Coulson, who seemed completely unfazed. The new man had the look of a man used to getting his way without question. Thor could see it in the confident stride and the set of his shoulders. There was alertness there too, though, and the sharp gleam of intelligence.

“Where is she?” the man was saying as he walked up to them. “If she’s started powering up that thing—”

“If by she,” Jane said above the whine of the plane’s engines as they began to power down, “You mean me, Dr. Jane Foster—”

“I do mean you.” Tony stuffed a hand on his pocket and held up a finger. “You weren’t planning on actually trying to initiate a stable connection today, were you? Because if you were you’d really only succeed in blowing us all up. Hey!” He was momentarily distracted by some workmen unloading a large metal box from the belly of the plane. “If anything in my luggage is busted, I’m making you pay for it!”

Jane bristled, and if he hadn’t known better (for he had learned, in the months since coming here, that Jane could defend herself with words as ably as he had once handled Mjolnir) Thor would have
stepped in to her defense. Such as what this man was doing would have been considered a grave insult in Asgard, but they were not in Asgard. As it was, his brows drew together.

“You will have a care how you speak to Jane,” he said. “Your words are a—“

“And you must be Thor,” Tony cut him off, taking the sunglasses off his face and twirling them around by one of the legs. “The god without his godliness. Tony Stark.” He held out a hand, but Thor just stared at it until he dropped it. “Sorry to disappoint you, Hercules, but I don’t care how I speak to anyone, and since the good doctor here has started playing on the field with the big boys, she can learn to take a little constructive criticism about how her estimates for calibrating the power converters are so far off they’re laughable.”

“I won’t know how I need to tweak the converters in the focusing device until I stimulate the—“

“Not here,” Coulson interjected suddenly. “Let’s talk inside.”

Thor could all but feel the heat coming off Jane as she fumed the whole elevator ride down to the level of the labs. If that hadn’t been enough he would have been able to tell by the tension in her shoulders, enough to make him reach over and put a hand on her lower back protectively. Jane did not need him to champion her anywhere but a field of battle, but he would not leave her unguarded either. He did not like the nerve of this man, but when Jane glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, a tiny smile of appreciation on her face, he felt a little better in his decision to not simply charge in with fists. This was a battle of the minds, and Thor knew he would be outpaced.

When they reached the lab, Tony and Jane immediately dropped into arguing again, striding off to the disc-like apparatus that was supposed to channel the Tesseract’s power. Thor couldn’t follow it after a while, and instead climbed the metal stairs to sit beside Darcy, dangling his feet off the edge of the raised catwalk and mimicking her posture – arms folded on the lower rung of the railing, chin on top them. She turned her head to look at him.

“They making your head hurt, too?” she asked. When he nodded, she smiled. “I can’t even keep up with Jane when she goes on one of her science benders,” she said with a sigh. “Now there are two of them.”

“He is unpleasant,” Thor muttered, not wishing his voice to carry to where the other two were now bent over two screens, slinging equations back and forth. “And disrespectful of others. As once I was.”

“That’s Tony Stark for you,” Darcy said. “He’s got like, three swimming pools’ worth of money that he practically swims in, so he kind of can do what he wants.”

“Somehow,” Thor replied, after some consideration, “That does not seem right at all.”

Darcy reached over and patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Big T,” she said. “Jane isn’t going to let Tony push her over. She knows what she’s doing, and she’s not going to let Tony get away with running over her in those ridiculously expensive sneakers.”

“Actually, fewer people let him get away with it than you might think.”

They both looked up, and then rose as Coulson approached. Jane and Tony had left whatever they were doing, still arguing back and forth, but now Thor could see that there was a light in Jane that hadn’t been there before, and it seemed less antagonizing and more like a very emphatic dialogue.

“Tony wants to see the Tesseract,” Coulson explained as they fell in behind the other two. “Take some readings before they get to work.”
“They’re working together?” Darcy asked. She seemed pleased for it, despite what she’d just been saying. “That mean Mr. Stark is going to be sticking around?”

“No. Tony.” The man in question spun around and walked backwards, pointing at Darcy and flashing her a brilliant smile. “Mr. Stark makes me feel like a high school physics teacher.”

“I wish,” Darcy muttered under her breath.

“And don’t worry, Chuck Norris,” Tony said as he turned back around. “Her math might be atrocious, but your girlfriend’s almost as smart as I am. That, and she seems to think that normal physics can’t explain this, which is patently false—”

“And I’m telling you—“

They went off again, and save for the clang of Agent Barton’s boots hitting the metal walkway and bringing up their rear, Jane and Tony were the only ones talking. Darcy always got quiet around the Tesseract, and though Thor was no sorcerer, he could feel its power tickling along his skin as they got close, making the hairs on his arms stand up again.

_It slumbers_, he thought, for some reason. _And yet it terrifies._

The container with the Tesseract inside rose into view, and after going through a decontamination chamber and putting on protective coats (though he heard Jane muttering over the intercom, wondering what exactly they thought these suits would protect them from), they were inside and scanning it with their instruments.

“They’ll be a while,” Coulson told Agent Barton. “I’ll leave you in charge.”

“Comin’ with you, Agent C,” Darcy said hurriedly. “Jane doesn’t need me right now, and I have about fifty pages of Tumblr to catch up on.” She paused by the elevator doors. “You gonna be okay here with the birdman, Thor?”

“I will be all right, thank you, Darcy.” The idea of leaving Jane alone with the Tesseract wasn’t a comforting one. At least, not this time. He would watch, this one time. Then he would have to trust she would be all right as well.

*

He found her later, up on the roof of one the buildings. The lights of the nearby city and the SHIELD installation itself made it difficult to see as many stars as they had been able to in Puente Antiguo, and there wasn’t the comforting crackle and warmth of Jane’s fire pit, but she’d dragged one of the blankets up from their bed and was on her back, staring up at what stars she could see.

Out of habit, Thor looked toward the part of the sky that held Asgard for a moment, then looked back at Jane. Whatever was going on there, he had accepted that he could not do anything about it. Jane, though…

“Does something trouble you?” he asked as he sat beside her. Jane looked over at him, the halogen lights casting harsh shadows on her face. She smiled, just a bit.

“Tony Stark is a pain in the ass,” she said. “Unfortunately he’s also right about some things. Apparently on the flight out here he read all my notes. He made corrections,” she muttered, but shrugged a shoulder. “I’ve gotta admit that some of his changes will make things work better. And we came up with more modifications that will, theoretically, channel the Tesseract’s power more efficiently and more safely. We don’t want to blow up the state when we try to stimulate it to productive levels.”
They sat in silence a while. Jane shifted over to put her head on his leg, and Thor stroked her hair as he thought. He was no scientist as she was, but Jane was smart enough to know he spoke with as much authority as he had when talking about matters of magic. “Jane, when you work with the Tesseract… please, take great care.”

She shifted, looking up at him. Even in the light he could see her brows draw together in thought. “Have you remembered something else about it?” she asked.

“No, but… Jane, it is nearly unlimited power, and it is said to be able to think for itself. I cannot… I cannot help but think that when you begin to run your tests, it will respond, but perhaps only because it wants to or because the mind that it has, such as it is, slumbers yet.”

“Thor,” Jane said, tilting her chin back to look up at him. “Hydra used this thing to power its weapons and vehicles for years. It didn’t do anything but sit there and have power siphoned off of it.”

“I have read of this Hydra,” Thor replied. “The man leading it was a man of great power. The cube could well have been obeying his will. It is an agent of chaos and destruction, or so the stories said.”

Jane sucked her lower lip into her mouth, and Thor could almost see thoughts ticking away inside like great wheels turning. “Do you think something will happen?” she asked at last.

“I do not know. Only that it feels as though a storm is coming, yet. I can feel it in my bones, Jane. I do not know if it will be for good or ill, but I… please, promise me you will have a care.” He smiled down at her, laying his hand along her cheek. “I know I cannot order you to something, and I would be a fool to try. But I am asking, as someone who loves you dearly and wants to see you unharmed, to be mindful that this is a power mortals were never meant to hold.”

Jane reached up and laid her hand over his, pressing her cheek into his palm. “I’ll be careful, Thor, I promise,” she said. “I want to still be around to see you get back what’s yours, back to your home, I want to see my work here published, and I… I don’t know how long I’ll have you. I hope a long time.” Her eyes closed, and a look of worry passed over her face. “But if this all ends up working, and you end up going home…”

“I gave you my word I would take you to Asgard with me. I would show you what you worked hard to attain – there are many there who would appreciate a woman of great intelligence such as yourself. Even if I regain Mjolnir, if I am allowed to return to Asgard – I will not abandon you, Jane, I love you too much for me to dishonor you in such a way.”

“But what happens if you do regain it? If you have all your… all the things you said you lost when your father banished you, your abilities and your immortality, what happens when you get all that back? I’m going to die one day, Thor, I’m just human. How long could you love me when I start to get old?” The way she said it, all the words coming out in a rush, made Thor think she had been building up to this for some time. He opened his mouth, but Jane wasn’t done.

“What about when I die?” She sat up, looking at him, and he could see that not all the twinkles in her eyes were from the lights. “What then? Are you just going to mourn me for the rest of eternity? Thor… as eager as I am to do this, to do something that has only been dreamed about in physics – I’m selfish. I worry that I’m just—“

“Jane, hush.” Thor pressed his fingertips to her lips and she shut them, looking up at him. He replaced his fingers with his mouth, and felt her sway against him, hands sliding up to rest on his shoulders. When he pulled away the tears had begun to fall, but she was smiling a little at least, and that made the hand around his heart unclench a little. Thor rubbed her tears away with his thumbs.
“I give you my word, Jane Foster, that I will not leave you behind for all the kingly titles and the shining gold towers in Asgard or any other realm,” he said, wishing at once he could have half Loki’s gift with words. To him what he said sounded as refined as raw wool, but by Jane’s face, he could see she paid no mind to the words themselves, only what he meant by them. “You have… helped me see that there are things that matter more than one’s own glory. You speak of it, ’tis true, but you speak also of your discoveries helping others to see and to learn and to know. You taught me to stop and think – a thing which I realize now that many others have tried to teach me,” he said with a little twist of his mouth, and they both smiled. “But most importantly, Jane, you were compassionate enough to bear my boorishness, and kind enough not to turn me away. You gave me hope when I would have been hopeless, and though I am from Asgard, for now and until we two part – however and whenever that may happen – my home is always where you are, too.”

He shook his head. “That is not the half of it, Jane, but I have no great skill with words, so I must ask you to trust the sincerity of my heart. You are a mortal, but it changes nothing. My heart is not so inconstant that it will stop loving you after you are—are gone, may it be far away and far in the future from now. That is in part why I wish you to be careful, Jane. I want to have many years with you, to watch your work get the recognition you deserve, for your dedication to it, to share in your happiness.”

Jane crawled into his lap and curled there, and Thor pressed their foreheads together; they remained that way for a long time. Jane’s fingers curled over his cheek and into his hair when she shifted to kiss him, a kiss that started out slow and quickly grew more passionate.

Jane had told him, once, that one of her previous lovers had said that she was frigid, distant as the stars she studied. Perhaps it was because Thor was from those very stars, or because he had been the one needing the support more than she, but he could not see it. Her work possessed her, drove her on at a mad pace and put her in blinders at times, but there was a heart under that. She would not have so many who cared for her otherwise. No, to Thor, Jane was as warm as the rim sea of Asgard, caring for others in her own way and buoying those around her with her sheer level of enthusiasm.

The rooftop was cold, the wind blowing off the desert whipping through them, but as Jane lay back on the blanket and pulled him to her, Thor only felt warm. Well, that and—

“Aren’t you certain?” he asked, fingers pausing on the fastening of her jeans. Jane grinned at him. There were tears in her eyes yet, but he did not think they were sadness anymore.

“If anyone’s watching some security footage or something, I hope they get a good show,” she said, and pulled him down to her, and put the worry of being watched, of gathering storms, out of his mind.

*

They poked, and they prodded, and they had no idea what they were doing.

Oh, there were equations – as it began to be aware of itself, it could feel the little pulses from the strange machines it was hooked up to that translated themselves into numbers and symbols and theories, and it felt amusement, because what they were doing was far beyond what they were capable of. Better to have stayed with using it as a source of power. It was power, after all, and of more than one sort.

As the days went on – seven, nine, thirteen, by the reckoning of mortals – it became more and more aware, more awake. And as it woke up, it became less than amused.

These mortals – their dreams were small, their ambition was not what it wanted to aid in. But there
were few here who it deemed worthy. One, with a heart as bright as a star; one with a mind like a blade; one in shadow, and one whose fire seemed dimmed somehow. Not threatening to go out. Merely banked.

But they were not enough. There were more powerful things in the realms and beyond them that it remembered, and it stretched out to them in a single invisible pulse of blue, and then it was silent.

*

Thor stared across the open grass and tried to ignore that there were agents and scientists and other SHIELD employees sitting around on the benches watching with great interest.

“You can always back out,” Tony said, his voice amplified by the suit of armor he wore. It was strange, even to Thor’s eyes, and in the center of the chest some device glowed brightly, but he was not so worried. Even without his power, he was stronger than most. Stark’s armor was fancy, but he was just a man. Still, it had been long since he’d sparred with anyone. He felt a familiar surge of excitement begin in his veins, the song of battle.

“I am no coward,” he said, and relaxed his stance. “I will fight you fairly, Tony Stark.”

“Oh? I guess chivalry isn’t dead after all. Too bad I don’t play by those rules.”

Then Thor was on the ground, wheezing, and Tony was standing over him, laughing.

“Y’know, for a god, you’re really kind of a pushover,” Tony said conversationally. Thor got to his feet, eyes narrowing even as he felt his ribs – none broken, though he’d have pretty bruises come the morrow.

“It’s really okay, I won’t hold it against you.” But there was the same kind of note in Tony’s voice as had been in Loki’s whenever his brother had seen fit to bring his magic and his tiny little knives to the training sands. It was the same tone of voice that indicated that yes, he would in fact hold it against Thor, and the mocking would be endless.

Thor grinned. This was going to be a fine diversion indeed.

*

They knew what they were looking for, and when it made itself known, they listened.

The heads of every one of the raiding party turned toward the north, the distinct ozone scent and electric tingling passing through every one of them. They had been raised around magic, they knew it well, and when something powerful called to them – as they had been told it would – they listened.

Their orders clear, they set out. With any luck, they’d be there and back to Muspelheim in a matter of hours with their prize.

*

“Ouch! Damn it!”

Jane sat back from where she’d been trying to slip the cube in its brackets, pulling the heavy gloves she wore off and sucking her finger. It had been almost two weeks since they’d started testing, and tonight would be a test at full power – though privately, Jane had her own concerns about how it would go, given the last few days’ results. Thor had said the thing was temperamental, but she hadn’t anticipated things like sudden shifts in polarity (making socketing it like trying to push two same-pole
magnets together). And when she’d ground her teeth and forced it forward, the damn thing had thrown off a spark and zapped her.

It was difficult enough to work with all this stuff she didn’t completely understand, Jane thought, sliding the cube back into its reinforced container and throwing the tongs down on the nearby table. Tony Stark didn’t seem to buy what he called ‘a wizard did it’ as a valid part of any theories involving generation of stable wormholes, which led to arguments over design and calibration. This thing blurred science and magic even more, and it was difficult enough taking all that into account without dealing with some inanimate object having a fit of temper.

“You’re like a child,” she told the cube, then shook her head and pulled her hair out of its ponytail. “Talking to something that can’t talk back like it really does have feelings. I must be losing my mind, no wonder nobody takes me seriously…”

From her perch on the raised walkway around this arc of the transit room, Darcy watched Jane pace and mutter to herself with great interest. They were all edgy, but Jane was the worst, and Thor bore the brunt of it. At least he had the other agents to train with and Tony Stark, though he’d seemed to take an interest in watching whenever Jane and Tony worked with the Tesseract. Darcy had decided this was not healthy behavior and had tried to distract him with the prospect of learning another card game with her and Clint. It hadn’t worked out so well.

Thor and Tony were outside training right now and probably being watched by Fury, who had flown in this morning and promptly demanded sitreps and sit-ups and sit-downs with everyone and that had caused everyone to go into a flurry of activity and clear out, but Clint was still here at least. Darcy appreciated the company. Now, if only she could start a conversation and have it last more than five minutes…

“So,” she said, gesturing to his bow and quiver of arrows that rested within reach. “Can you use those things?”

He gave her a look. “No. I just carry them around because I like them.”

Darcy scrunched her nose up. Uncomfortable silence it was, then.

* 

Thor picked himself up off the grass and swiped his wrist across his face – it came away bloody, but he didn’t mind.

“Seriously,” Tony was saying. “I get that you’re all honor in battle and stuff, but this is kind of giving me secondhand embarrassment.”

“It is not the way of Asgardians to back out of a fight without good cause. I have none.”

“Yeah, you do. You’re getting your ass kicked.”

“When I return home, I will take you with Jane and I,” Thor told him, getting to his feet. “You may test your suit against our warriors.”

“At the rate we’re going, we’ll all be dead before anything happens,” Tony replied, and popped open his faceplate. “And I’ll be dead before you—“

Thor had discovered the ability to fly with Mjolnir not long after acquiring it, and had promptly crashed into one of the palace towers after doing so. He was not so swift now, but he was no slouch, and his fist connected solidly with Tony’s cheek as soon as the faceplate allowed for it. A dirty tactic,
but then, he had had a very good teacher in not fighting precisely fair, hadn’t he?

Perhaps the graceless fall back to the ground clutching his face was the final straw, or maybe the roar of laughter that went up from the people watching, but when Tony got up, he looked *pissed*.

“All right, Rock,” he muttered, and closed his faceplate again. “I’m done playing around with you.”

It was only because Tony lowered his faceplate at precisely that moment that the dark specks growing larger in the sky became visible. Thor stood up out of his ready stance, brows drawing together in confusion.

“Look there,” he said, pointing. Others were beginning to notice, too, some muttering uneasily. “What is that?”

“Oh, right, like I’m going to fall for *that* one.”

“I do not jest,” Thor said, and at the worried note in his voice Tony turned to look. Whatever he saw had him suddenly bristling with weaponry, and the unease in the crowd turned into full panic as everyone suddenly began shoving for doors and bunkers, and agents in blue-and-black field gear poured out of open doors.

“What the *hell* are those?” Tony asked.

* A loud *bong* echoed through the transit center. They both looked up, saw Jane half-vanished inside the guts of the device that was supposed to harness the cube’s energy for transit; she appeared to have kicked one of the metal struts in frustration. Darcy eyed how Clint had reached for his bow when they’d heard the noise.

“Don’t most sharpshooters prefer guns?”

“I’m not most sharpshooters.”

“I guess people never expect arrows.”

“They never expect to be grilled by college undergrads, either.”

Another *bong*; neither one of them looked up, though Clint tightened his fingers on his bow for a moment before relaxing. Jane dropped a tool with a clatter and cursed.

“I’m just asking questions about the guy who follows us around.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Maybe because I’m curious?”

“I’m curious about Thor, but I don’t go up to him and play twenty questions.”

“That’s because Thor could crush you. But he’s really a nice guy. I wouldn’t let Jane sleep with him if he was really the wacko we thought he was when we ran him over the first time.”

Clint’s lips twitched. “The first time?”

“There was a second time. Also, I tased him.” Darcy smiled fondly at the memory. “Oh, those were the days. I remember when—“
This time, when the noise echoed through the transit center, their seats shook too. Darcy and Clint sat up, him reaching for his weapons and arrows. Even Jane slid back out of the device and peered up at them.

“What’s that?” she asked.

The next impact was a lot stronger, and up above the raised platform connected to the device, the retractable doors shuddered, buckled a bit.

“Dr. Foster,” Clint said, suddenly all business. “Get the Tesseract, and you and Darcy stay close to me. We’ll take it back to the secure lab and I’ll get you two to safety.”

He pressed his earpiece and began talking quickly as Jane scooped up the container with the Tesseract inside it and ran over. Suddenly very afraid, Darcy stuck closer than was probably necessary as the three of them left the transit center and headed upstairs. Whatever it was, it was bad enough to shake them underground.

“What’s going on?” Jane asked, fingers tight on the handle of the container. Inside, the Tesseract pulsed a brighter blue than usual.

“The compound’s been attacked by…” Clint’s brow furrowed. “Nobody knows.”

“How can nobody know?”

“Because these things we’ve never seen before. Put that thing away and I’m taking you to safety.”

Jane locked the container back into place, and they watched as Clint pressed a button and the whole apparatus sank into the floor. “It’ll be locked in a shielded vault until the all-clear is given,” he explained. “Come on.”

“Thor—“

“He’s up above. I’ll get him.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you—“

“Don’t you dare tell me no.” Jane sounded more dangerous than Darcy had ever heard her, tiny and tense and ready to fight this guy who could probably pin her in three seconds flat… and Clint blinked.

“Stick close,” he said. The three of them took off at a run for the stairs to ground level.

* 

Unnoticed in the facility’s command center, one of the monitors showing a live feed of Mjolnir began to blink. Had there been someone at this station, it would have triggered an alarm, but nobody was watching.

Nobody saw the hardened dirt around the hammer begin to crumble.

* 

He ducked as another blast from one of their attackers kicked up a spray of dirt and rock. Tony Stark recovered first and fired back beams of light at the creature attacking them and it died with a haunting
wail.

Even without his powers, without Mjolnir, Thor felt the thrill of battle in his veins. Though it had been what had landed him here, he could not deny that for an Asgardian this was what they lived for, and for centuries he had been the embodiment of it. Caution tempered his actions, somewhat, but so did concern, for there had been many people on the ground when these creatures had attacked, flying in low so nobody could see them until they were almost on top of them.

Now, Thor scrambled to his feet and reached for the three agents he’d been running with toward the entrance to the underground facility. “Go, go!” he cried, getting them all to their feet. “I will watch your backs!”

The four of them bolted toward the door, listening carefully for the telltale whine of one of the attackers noticing them. When it came, Thor turned to look and caught the impact square in the chest as the thing tackled him to the ground. Had he been in possession of his powers, in full armor, it wouldn’t have been a problem. But he felt ribs crack that had already been stressed by the beating Tony had given him, and gasped as pain blossomed in both sides.

The ugly thing had a face, at least, or what passed for it. Thor ground his teeth and slammed his fist into one beady eye, and the creature shrieked in surprise and pain and rolled off him. Shoving the white-hot agony away, Thor climbed to his feet. The three agents he’d been trying to get inside had made it, at least. Stark occupied two more of the creatures, the one called Fury had some kind of Midgard magical device that was shooting flaming, exploding things, and more had gotten their weaponry and were engaged in battle.

Something connected hard with his face and Thor let it push him around, using the momentum to spin him back for a kick. The thing snarled and Thor drove forward, fists and feet striking out. Hand to hand was one of the things he was better at and though he did not have the power, he still knew the movements. Good enough.

He struck it one more time and it screamed and went down in a cloud of dirt and limbs, and Thor let himself stand there, trying to breathe around the undoubtedly-broken ribs and the countless scrapes and cuts he’d sustained along with it, trying to balance himself—

“Thor!”

He spun. “Jane?” he called out. What was she doing out here? She had been underground, below, safe—

“You have to come with me!” she shouted, reaching out to him, stepping out of the protective shadow of the building. He gestured her away furiously.

“Get back inside!”

She got that stubborn set to her face and part of him screamed not now; Thor loved her for her will but she was not a warrior, she was a scholar, and she could not survive if one of these things attacked her. She stank of magic to them, probably, and they would follow her scent back to the Tesseract, and then who knew what would happen from there?

“I’m not going without you!”

“I’ll be fine—“ he cut off. One of the creatures had gotten on top of the building and was crouched over the edge, sniffing the air. It was sniffing for magic, it smelled Jane, it saw Jane—

He didn’t think. One minute he was swaying from pain and exhaustion, the next he was running
across the open area, boots digging into the ground as he forgot about everything else and concentrated only on getting her (and Darcy, he saw, and other agents pushing around them who would be caught in the wake) to safety. She could go on without him, but if he lost her, if he had Jane’s blood, and Darcy’s and anyone else’s on his hands – if anyone died while he could yet keep them from harm…

Yggdrasil, Mother of all, let me have the strength to protect them, he prayed. Stars and Branches, let what I have be enough to keep these people safe.

*

The agents in the Mjolnir compound had clustered around the static-filled screens.

“What’s going on?” someone murmured.

“It looks like – holy shit!”

The hammer shot straight up from its pedestal, rocketing up in an arc that pointed away north. A sonic boom echoed off the hills, rattled the equipment and the whole base. Car alarms went off.

The AIC stared out the glass door, watching the streak of cloud left in Mjolnir’s path.

“What the hell?”

*

Looking back on this moment years later, Thor could not remember what it was that made him put out his hand. He could only remember that it seemed the right thing to do, that as he ran without thought to his own safety, somehow his strength would be enough. Instinct, perhaps, or intuition, drove him to it.

And when leather smacked into his palm and power – his power, the power of thunder and storms – flooded him, it was instinct that drove him onward still. Hundreds of years of drills and warrior training took over, and though it had been months since he had last done it, Thor swung Mjolnir with the same assurance as he always had. Lightning crackled and thunder rolled and the creature flew back from where it had stretched its claws out to strike, hitting the side of the building with enough force to crack the siding before it slid down to the ground, dazed.

He paid no mind to the armor enveloping him again, the scale mail flying back into place around his arms – that was not as important as making sure Jane, Darcy, and the rest got to safety and these things attacking them were properly quelled. He barely registered the faint holy shit from Tony as he streaked overhead in his armor, tiny projectiles flying out to bring the beast to its end just as it was getting to its feet again, for there was another one running in across the courtyard, one that met its grisly end when Mjolnir flew out its back. The wind of its passage cleansed it of gore before it returned to his hand.

“See, Jane?” he called over his shoulder as stormclouds began to gather overhead, Mjolnir almost humming in his hand with potential. “I will be all right! Wait for me inside!”

She seemed at first to be as dazed as the creature he’d hammered against the wall, but gave herself a little shake and nodded, reaching for Darcy on one side and the nearest dumbstruck agent on the other and putting her arms around them both, shouting her own directions to everyone. Thor could not help but be proud of her – no warrior, it was true, but a leader all the same.

Then the battle was joined again, but not for long. The archer had found a vantage point and his
arrows exploded through some sorcery or science, and so Thor left it to him to pick off ones or warn of those attacking from behind, and threw himself into the fray. It felt good, right to do this, to call down the lightning upon a beast pursuing unarmed agents, to use his power in protection. He was a shield made of the strongest steel, and that, he thought as he banished the lightning from where it had charred the body of a creature trying to crawl inside one of the buildings and looked around, was how it ought to be.

The archer – Barton, Clint Barton, who called himself Hawkeye sometimes – and Tony joined him after they’d both called out the all-clear and agents had begun to filter back out to carry off the fallen and the wounded. Both men were looking at him anew, or as though he had sprouted another head. Tony popped his faceplate and leaned over to look at all of him, crossing his arms when he had.

“I guess we’re gonna need a rematch, Point Break,” he said, shading his eyes as the clouds began to break up and drift across the sun. “You’re… pretty good. But don’t get ideas.”

“I would not,” Thor replied. “There is no need to prove ourselves to each other in battle now, Tony Stark, for you have shown that you are an able companion.”

Tony opened his mouth, closed it again. “I’m still calling for a rematch. Now that you’ve got a better chance of not embarrassing yourself, you know.”

“Then it shall be done.” He looked at Barton. “Would you also like to test your strength against mine, Agent Barton?” The marksman held up his hands.

“I’m all good, thanks.”

“Thor!”

All three of them looked over. Tony wasn’t subtle about his muttered imprecations, but Nick Fury didn’t seem to notice as he walked over to where they were all standing and put his hands on his hips, sizing Thor up.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “I want to debrief all of you, Before any new shit ha—”

The door banged open and Jane half-ran out toward them, some piece of her equipment slung across her shoulder. Fury whipped around.

“What the hell—”

“Atmospheric disturbance,” Jane said breathlessly, opening the laptop she’d brought out with her and plugging the particle detector into it, fingers flying across the keys. “Gonna be happening right overhead. Want to see how the Tesseract responds to it.”

Thor felt a surge of elation. “You mean… the Bifrost is opening?” he asked. Jane grinned at him,
and though it shook a bit he could see that she knew he wouldn’t just abandon her.

“Looks like it. Not sure if – woah!”

She looked up, eyes widening. The others did too, and belatedly Thor realized it had been growing dimmer again, clouds swirling out of nowhere right above them.

“It opens here,” he said. Jane trotted up beside him, the laptop in the crook of one arm, as dust pattered against their legs.

“Maybe they saw you proved yourself and decided you can go back now,” she said, and then pressed her earpiece. “Darcy? Are you—is it doing anything? It—what?”

She turned away, trying to hear, and then made a noise and tore the thing out of her ear. “Static!” she said. “Too much interference—she knows what to do, though. Few more seconds—”

The sky seemed to break. A pillar of light and sound rocketed straight down to the ground in front of them, close enough for everyone’s ears to pop, bright enough for everyone to close their eyes and turn away until, with a boom that echoed off the distant mountains, everything was silent again.

Thor dropped his arm and tried to peer through the dust, wondering who – or what – it could be. More of those creatures, perhaps, if Asgard had been overrun? His fingers tightened on Mjolnir’s handle, but the two figures that appeared as the dust kicked up by the wind settled and the sun began to break through the dissipating clouds once more were, perhaps, two of the most welcome faces he had ever laid eyes on.

The sun gleamed on Loki’s gold formal armor, his cape flying out around him. Sif’s hair in its long tail whipped back and forth, catching the light just as much as her silver armor reflected it. Strange, that it would be the two of them, but after so many months Thor was simply glad to see his brother and his friend.

“Brother,” Loki said, and Thor felt himself grin fit to split his face. “It’s so good to see you again.”

* 

“Who—” someone began, but Thor had already covered the distance between himself and his brother and swept Loki up into a tight hug, so strong that leather creaked. As usual, Loki was slow to respond and awkward when he did, patting Thor’s shoulder, then thumping it with a fist when he started losing air. Obediently Thor put Loki down, but kept his hands on his shoulders.

“This is good!” he boomed. Loki smiled – it seemed uncertain, but smoothed out quickly enough – and delicately stepped back from Thor’s grip.

“Thor,” Fury said, and he turned to see that Clint and the other SHIELD agents had their weapons out and at the ready, and Tony had his hands up, palms facing them. They all looked more than a little nervous, but Fury’s voice didn’t shake at all. “This is your brother?”

“Yes.” He put a hand on Loki’s shoulder again. “May I present my younger brother, Loki Odinson, King of Asgard since the death of our father. And with him is Lady Sif, a companion of ours for many years and battles, and a great friend to us both.”

He felt Loki tense under his hand, and when he looked back to see what was the matter he could only see Loki had a very carefully blank face in the way of when there was something he wanted to say but could not, and Sif was giving his brother a look through narrowed eyes. It was a look that Loki met, and something passed unspoken between them. Sif pressed her lips together.
“I’m afraid my brother has been in this realm long enough to miss much that has happened in Asgard,” Loki said, addressing the gathered semicircle of people. “I am Loki, King of Asgard, as he said, and this is the Lady Sif - Queen of Asgard.”

It took a moment for what Loki had said to fully sink in. At first, Thor thought surely his brother was making some jest, and any second Sif would turn round and smack the back of his head, like she used to when they were growing up, and tell him to stop playing stupid tricks and be serious for once. But she didn’t. In fact, she inclined her head, and there was a kind of regality in the motion that Sif had never had before. Pride, yes, but she seemed truly a queen in that moment.

“We come to you because you have something of great power that puts all of you in danger,” she said, but before she could continue, Fury stepped forward, holstering his gun.

“Forgive me for not knowing how to properly address royalty from another planet,” he said, “But I don’t think we should talk about this in the open. We’ve just had an attack here, by things we’ve never seen before, and then you two show up right on the end of it talking about the very thing we’re pretty sure they’re after.”

“Surely you do not suspect my brother and… Sif,” Thor said. He could hardly even think about his brother being wed – wed to Sif, who had been dirtying her dresses and scraping her knees with the both of them since they were small. He had never thought Sif would marry anyone or anything except for her glaive and shield.

Fury just shrugged. “You know how it looks. But we’ll be more comfortable inside.” He looked at the three of them, his eyebrow arched up high. “It sounds like the three of you sure got a lot to talk about.”

He made a little gesture and a hasty guard was assembled, one on either side of his brother and Sif as they walked up ahead with Fury. Thor stood there watching them, feeling his head spinning. He didn’t know Jane had come up beside him until she put her hand on his arm.

“You okay?” she asked him. “You look like a bomb’s just been dropped on you.”

Thor didn’t quite understand the saying, but he assumed it meant something close to how he was feeling. “My brother is wed,” he said quietly. “To our childhood friend.” He looked down and took the particle detector from her, carrying it easily in one hand. Her fingers squeezed his arm through his mail, and together they started back toward the building.

“I’m sure you two will get a chance to talk,” she said. “I bet there’s a lot of catching up to do.”

“So it would seem,” Thor murmured. Jane bit her lip, looking up at him, and for a few steps they both were silent. But then she grinned.

“But until then,” she said, shifting her laptop so it was tucked under one arm. “Let’s talk about your new look…”
Exothermic

Chapter Notes

Well, this chapter's been kind of a wild ride. July was a nutty month for me, then I got inspired and had it largely finished, then my old laptop kicked the bucket and I lost it (my data's still in the process of being rescued, in fact), so I had to start over from what notes I had and what I remembered. From last Wednesday to today I've been writing at least a little bit every day, and the result is, according to my betas, none the worse for wear. So I hope you all enjoy it, and thank you for sticking with it - or if you are just getting here for the first time, welcome!

exothermic; In thermodynamics, the term exothermic describes a process or reaction that releases energy from the system, usually in the form of heat, but also in the form of light (e.g. a spark, flame, or explosion), electricity (e.g. a battery), or sound (e.g. burning hydrogen).

The corridor they were escorted into was long, and sloped downward to a pair of silver doors at the far end. It was lit like a feast-day – if the thousands of feast-day lanterns had been condensed into a space far too small for them, bright white lights on bright white walls (did mortals know no other colors?), with only the occasional door branching off to either side. Sif was used to brightness, for Asgard was never truly dark, but everything closed around her now, and no hall in Asgard was narrow enough to make their staccato footsteps rattle the bones of her skull, nor cause the bare whisper of Loki’s cape on the floor to sound like a rushing wave.

More than that, there was growing sensation, like a buzz in the back of her mind that set her teeth on edge. It was almost a physical presence, and made her think of standing before the Allfather in the fullness of his power. But this power was a dark thing, a hungry creature that put its fingers into her skin and pushed deeper and deeper the closer they got to the end of the hallway. Loki’s expression became blander as they walked, so she surmised he must feel it too. It made her wish she could reach for the hilt of her glaive, or perhaps slip her shield onto her arm to put it between them and the thing reaching out for them.

Sif didn’t like it, not one bit.

The doors at the end of the hallway led to a small windowless room which the son of Coul referred to as an elevator, even though when the doors shut and one of the guards pressed what looked like a tiny rectangle of glass to a gray box and thumbed a button beside it, the room went down instead of up. It made her heart beat faster, but she took a breath in and let it out, relaxing her muscles one by one. When she had done so, with the press of bodies inside, she felt safe enough in reaching out to brush her fingertips over Loki’s knuckles, feeling that he was warm and alive and there and letting him know she was all right. A moment later she felt him return the touch. His skin was clammy, but the touch was sure.

The doors opened into a glassed-in promenade overlooking a huge room. One end of it was full of equipment – things with designs scrolling across them, banks of gray boxes with blinking lights, long tables with smaller pieces of equipment (weapons? tools?) laid out on them. Long black cables snaked from a disc-shaped device to a low black platform surrounded by curved panels. There were
a few mortals sweeping up debris, but it was otherwise deserted.

“We’ll wait here for everyone else,” she heard Fury say quietly to Coulson, and went to join Loki by one of the windows. His eyes were darting around, taking it all in. She saw him linger on certain things – the machines with designs and script moving across them, the circular device – gaze calculating as he rested his fingers on the window ledge. He seemed to have a better idea of what things were, somehow, because when he finished his sweep his brow furrowed.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“I’d rather wait until everyone’s here before giving the tour,” Fury said.

“It is but a simple question—“

“One that can wait, Your Majesty.”

He brushed past Sif, saying, “Do not interrupt me, Director,” in a way that made Sif tense up. The look on his face was worrisome enough, but it was his voice, soft and sibilant, that was most concerning. She wasn’t any diplomat but even she knew that attacking an envoy was a bad idea.

Luckily, they were interrupted by the elevator doors opening and most of the rest of the group spilling out into the promenade behind them. Sif could not help her heart lifting to see Thor again as he came out, some piece of equipment in his arms as he talked quietly with the mortal woman beside him. The way they leaned toward each other told her more than words could, and that made Sif smile even more.

Fury turned away to confer with someone on his earpiece, and that was enough time for Loki to turn and head back through the milling crowd of uniformed mortals toward the brown-haired woman standing beside Thor. “You are Jane Foster, are you not?” he said, putting on his most charming smile.

“Yeah, that’s me,” she replied, shifting her things in her hands. “How do you know—no, not important right now, I’ve got questions—“

“Later, Dr. Foster,” Fury said, above the growing murmur of voices in the promenade. Loki glanced back over his shoulder – Sif tried to catch his eye to give him a quelling look and failed – and then back at the mortal.

“You are known to us in Asgard,” he said.

“IT would be my honor to answer your questions.”

Thor came up beside Sif as Fury lifted a hand and the guards started ushering them toward the open doors leading onto yet another bland hallway. “He may be king, but there are things about him that will not change,” he said. Sif smiled a little as they walked.

“You mean his ability to be insufferable as ever? No, that will never change about him,” Sif agreed. This hallway was carpeted at least, and their boots whispered on the floor, at least until they turned down another hallway with a tiled floor again. “In fact, I think that particular trait has gotten worse since his coronation.”

Behind them, they heard Loki asking, “So tell me, what is it that you do, Doctor?” and that started them laughing. A bit of the apprehension Sif felt bled away then, even as they lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

Thor was the one to break it, his voice quiet and his hand coming to rest heavily on her shoulder as they turned down a short hallway ending in a set of frosted glass doors. “I am glad to see you again,
Sif,” he said. “You and my brother both. There was a time here when I believed I would not ever be worthy of Mjolnir again, much less see Loki or my friends. Luckily, I was not allowed to be without hope for very long.” He glanced back over his shoulder at Jane, and Sif caught the way his face softened as he looked at her gesticulating wildly as she explained something to Loki.

“Do not discount them,” he said as they waited for Fury to open the doors. “Mortals they may be, but they are good people, smart and kind and with great strength. Their hearts are too big for their bodies, betimes, but that is not a fault.”

Sif looked up at him, and covered his hand with her own for a moment, surprised. The Thor she knew before would not have said such a thing. She felt proud. “You have changed much in these last few months, Thor,” she said with a smile. “I will remember your counsel.”

“My father – our father, I suppose – was always trying to make me see that I needed to change thus. I am only sad that he never saw his wish fulfilled, and that because of my failures, Loki had to take up burdens that should have been mine.” Sif had to bite down on her lip to keep from saying anything as the doors slid open before them and they walked through.

The room made her breathe easier, at least; larger than the corridors they’d been through, with a high ceiling lost to the dimness beyond the hanging lights, the room was dominated by a long oval table of polished black glass. Chairs lined either side. Coulson went to stand by a larger one at the head of the table, while Fury went over to a bank of clear pieces of glass that lit up with displays at his touch. Everyone who came into the room seemed to know where to go – the guards either filtering out through another door or taking up positions along the walls, others taking seats. Jane and Thor put the things they’d been carrying on a smaller table by the door and sat together; the archer was next, closer to the head of the table. Sif felt out of place for a moment before she tilted her chin up and marched over to a chair. She was a warrior, one recognized for her bravery and skill, and she was queen of Asgard and the Nine Realms besides. She would not let herself be put off by the strange customs of a realm she had not visited in hundreds of years. Loki brushed his hand over her back as he passed by and took the seat beside her.

“Now that we’re all here,” Fury said, taking the seat Coulson had stood beside at last, “Anyone care to tell me what the hell just happened?”

Part of the table under her palms lit up, and Sif moved her hands, watching as the battle was replayed for them. It was a useful tool, this, she thought; smaller boxes along the top showed the assailants as red dots, and she could watch how some of them served to scatter defending forces, while a smaller group went methodically through the buildings.

“I do not recognize the creatures,” she said, gesturing to where she could see the same display hovering midair above the table. “But look, you can see they have at least a rudimentary plan. Here these ones are, pulling your forces out to the edges of the compound, while this group scatters those who are not fighting, and this group is – is sniffing for something.”

“The cube, probably,” the archer said. “They pretty much went right for the building it was in.”

A bright flash of light caught Sif’s eye, and she could not help a smile as she watched the replay of Mjolnir and its power returning to Thor. She also could not miss how Loki’s hands tightened just slightly on the arms of his chair.

“They are denizens of one of the lower realms,” Loki said. “We have not faced them before in battle, but many such things are crawling out from their holes, answering the call.”
“So they serve someone else?” Fury pressed his lips together. “Any idea who?”

“Surtur.” Even saying his name made Sif feel uneasy.

Thor’s brow furrowed deeply. “Surtur? But I thought Father stripped him of his power, locked him away so he might never be a threat again.”

“The binding was not a permanent one,” Loki replied. “It would take a lot more than the ability of one man – even one so great as the Allfather – to hold Surtur for eternity. It was a stopgap, one that was never reinforced. Surtur has had his freedom for some time; long enough, at least, to summon armies to fight for him, and to reforge his blade of twilight.”

“He has been sending his forces against Asgard and the rest of the realms allied with us for months,” Sif added. “And he has attacked Asgard itself—“

“What?” Thor looked between them. “How is this possible? Asgard is—“

“Not without its share of weaknesses,” Loki said frostily. “Surtur has the aid of someone in Asgard.”

“Impossible. Nobody would betray the House of Odin—“

“But they would betray me.” Loki crossed his arms. “Loyalty to the throne and the Allfather are different than loyalty to the present king. But that does not concern you.”

“Asgard is my home, Brother, of course it concerns me—“

“I said it does not,” Loki snapped, and everyone shifted uncomfortably. Loki was glaring at Thor, who was looking back at his brother, confused.

Before either of them could say anything more, a man entered the room in what Sif assumed was the loudest and most noticeable way possible. He froze just inside the door, looking around the table with a completely false look of startlement on his face.

“Well, it looks like I walked into something awkward,” he said. “But no matter.” His eyes settled on Sif and he grinned broadly, sweeping over and scooping up her hand, placing a kiss on the knuckles in a messy, inelegant imitation of the gesture she was used to.

“Tony Stark, billionaire, philanthropist, genius engineer, consultant. I know it’s a step down from queen, but…”

Smiling a bit, Sif pulled her hand back. “I would not abandon any of my oaths,” she told him mildly. “I am a peacock, strutting about for the show of it – he put her in mind of Fandral, actually – but she could see something about him that hinted at hidden depths.

“Nice of you to finally join us, Mr. Stark,” Fury deadpanned. “Will you please take a seat so that we can continue with this debriefing?”

“Anything for you, Director.” Tony sauntered over to a chair and sat, pressing a series of buttons in rapid order and calling up entirely different displays in the center of the table – something that, judging by the reactions of Coulson and Fury, he wasn’t supposed to do – all of which centered around the red and gold armor she’d seen when they arrived. Tony seemed pleased with being able to see himself from so many angles. “You know I have to park my baby carefully and make sure she’s all tucked in after use. Speaking of which,” he pointed lazily at Loki. “Are you responsible for those things? I have about a dozen upgrades to my suit that I want to make now, so thanks for that. Still can’t believe you’re his brother, though, or that you’re married to her.”

“My queen and I were neither of us responsible for this assault,” Loki replied tightly. He was looking
murderous, and Sif quickly took over before he could begin to get any traction.

“We were just telling the director that they were sent by Surtur, an ancient foe of Asgard’s, in order to retrieve the Tesseract,” she said.

“The glowy blue thing we’ve been working with for the last two weeks?”

“We don’t know much about it,” Jane spoke up. “It’s previously been used as an energy source, but before that it was hidden in a church in Norway. We think it’s actually what we call a zero-point energy source. We were hoping to use it to power a connection between Earth and Asgard, but, well…”

“So what do you think it is?” the archer – Barton, Sif recalled suddenly, she had overheard someone referring to him as Agent Barton – asked. “Since everyone else here seems to have a different idea.”

Sif and Thor filled in a few things, but it was Loki who did most of the talking. He was the scholar, the one who knew the most about it and had the magical ability to back it up.

“The Tesseract is not only powerful in its own right, it can enhance the innate abilities of whoever is nearby,” Loki said. “If Surtur were to possess it, then to say he would be unstoppable would be putting it lightly. He would conquer every one of the Nine Realms, and that is not the worst of it.”

“It can get worse?”

Loki raised his eyebrows at Barton. “It can always be worse.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way – especially you, Thor, I kinda like you – but what do you expect us to do about this?” Tony was reclining dangerously far back in his chair, feet kicked up onto the edge of the table. “I mean, what just happened up there – those things were grunts. Cannon fodder. And if they’re not the only thing this Surtur has up his sleeve, and if you shiny space Vikings are having trouble keeping him under control…”

“With all due respect to your capabilities, Asgard is better prepared to fight this war,” Sif replied. “But your realm will not be safe so long as the Tesseract remains here, for that is what Surtur wants to tip the scales in his favor. We came to retrieve it, to take it back with us where we can safeguard it… and to ask for Thor to return with us, to aid in the war.”

“You come here on the heels of an alien attack force,” Fury said, cutting through the silence that followed with a voice made of the same steel as her blade. “You tell us there’s a galactic war going on, then you tell us you mean to take something that could be a great asset to this planet as well as weaken our team by one. Doesn’t seem very helpful to me.”

“As long as the Tesseract is here, you will be a target,” Loki pointed out.

“We keep it moving.”

“It is not so simple as that, not with a thing like this.”

Fury and Loki stared each other down a moment, and when Fury looked away, there was no sense that Loki had won. “I’m afraid that giving up the Tesseract is not on the table at this point,” he said.

“You are willing to risk your entire realm for a point of pride?”
“It’s more than pride, Your Majesty,” and Fury’s voice turned icy. “It’s a matter of it being the one bargaining chip we have that you want to take away.”

“We do it for your benefit—“

“And how do we know you aren’t going turn around and try to use it on us?”

“C’mon, Fury, don’t be so paranoid,” Tony said. “I’m sure the nice aliens are good as their word, if they’re anything at all like the one we know.”

“It would not stop at Surtur,” Loki said quietly, and Sif looked over; his voice was bleak, and his eyes were distant. “The Tesseract calls power to itself, and Surtur is not the most powerful thing in the realms.”

The table was silent for a few moments, until Fury cleared his throat. “It seems we’ve reached an impasse for now,” he said. “I believe Dr. Foster would appreciate you taking a look over her work, Your Majesty,” he said. “And we can show you that the cube is safe and secure in our facility. Thor…” he looked over, jaw working for a moment. “If you want to go with your brother, it’s your call. We’ve got no hold over you.”

Thor shifted his chin off his palm, his eyes finally moving from where they’d been fixed on Loki for the last few minutes, brows knit together. He looked between his brother and Sif, then Jane. “I will need some time to think on it, Brother,” he said. “If that is agreeable.”

Loki’s expression turned calculating for a moment, and the pause went on so long that Sif almost shifted and answered Thor herself, but at last he nodded. “We planned to be on Midgard more than a day,” he replied. “I would see the Tesseract.”

The room filled with the sound of shuffling feet and rolling chairs as everyone stood and filtered out, the guards taking up positions in escort once more. As they left the room, Sif could not help but notice that Coulson and Fury were putting their heads together over the screen in the table, talking quietly. But then the doors closed, and she put it from her mind.

* * *

The closer they got to the room the Tesseract was in, the more Loki could feel it. His magic, still depleted when he’d arrived on Midgard, surged as though it was completely restored. Loki felt strong, powerful, like he could take on Surtur’s armies himself – like he could take on Surtur—

He realized what he was thinking with a start, and dug his nails into his palms until the pain jolted him out completely from the thrall. Inside the small lab room, the Tesseract pulsed bright blue, sparkling innocuously. Deceptive, he thought. And aware. Aware of them, certainly, as they were aware of its influence. Sif’s hand had gone to hover over where he knew she had a knife tucked away, and to the other side, he could see the fine blond hairs on the backs of Thor’s hands standing up.

There was a mortal woman in the lab already, perched on a stool as far away as she could get from the pedestal the Tesseract rested in. She looked to be of an age with Jane, but when the other woman entered the room she jumped up immediately.

“Where were you? I thought you had just left me here with that—that freaky thing!” she wailed, waving her hands about dramatically. Jane put her own hands up in a warding gesture.

“Darcy—“
“Do you know what it’s like stuck down here in this tiny little room with the cosmic One Ring? It’s like the setting for some psycho horror movie where everyone gets mind-controlled or turned into zombies or—”

“Darcy!” Jane’s voice was sharp as a knife, and it served to make the girl – Darcy – fall silence. She still looked petulant, though, and Loki reevaluated her slightly. She had to have great fortitude to be anything but completely terrified after spending a prolonged period of time with the Tesseract.

“At least we all decided we didn’t have to wear those dumb suits,” Darcy muttered. “Who’re the new hotties out there?”

She was looking at Sif and himself with interest. Jane rolled her eyes and plugged some kind of curved metal wand into a tablet. Graphs and lettering began scrolling across the surface, and Jane turned away to give it her full attention.


“Of course you would. I meant their names, Tony. Besides, Pepper—”

“Oh, let’s not involve the lady.” Tony made a gesture at Loki and Sif. “Thor’s scrawny little brother Loki, and his bombshell of a wife, Sif. He’s literally a king, can you believe it? Who lets a god of mischief be in charge of anything?”

Loki gave Tony a withering look, and Sif opened her mouth to rebuke him, but it was Thor who beat them both to it.

“Have a care with how you speak, Stark,” he said. “Loki is now the rightful king of Asgard, and he is my brother. I would have you keep a civil tongue.”

“A modicum of respect when talking to me would be appreciated as well,” Sif muttered as she turned back to watching the Tesseract, her eyes narrowing again. That worried Loki; Sif was usually much easier to read, but here her face was a mask. The Tesseract inspired ill feelings in all around it. He didn’t want it to work its poisonous charms on his wife.

“A worthy effort, Thor, but I have the impression that civility is not high on this man’s list of priorities.” Inside, though, Loki bristled. The heckling he could take – as much as it got under his skin and nettled him, he had dealt with it in one way or another for most of his life – but Thor jumping to his defense stirred up too many conflicting things. The Thor who had been banished from Asgard had not been so quick to do it. This Thor, apparently, was. He and Sif had been through much in their months of marriage and rule, but the fragile partnership they had built was threatened by the presence of his brother. Adopted brother.

“Masterpiece Theater over there has it right.” Tony spread his hands as he walked backward into the lab’s antechamber. “I don’t do civil if I don’t have to, and sometimes even if I do have to. It’s so boring.” He passed through the two sets of doors; his voice became tinny, piped out to them through speakers. “How’s it looking, Doctor?”

Jane turned to look at him with a grin. “It did react,” she said, and she sounded as if this was a triumph. Tilting her tablet for Stark to look at, she pointed at some of the graphs with three of her fingers. “Here’s baseline gamma radiation, what we’ve been recording. Since we started testing there’s been a slow but steady increase in output—”

“That thing’s been putting out more gamma radiation?” Fury muttered as he walked up with Coulson on his heels, as Loki pointedly turned his back and followed Stark into the lab as well. “Just fucking
“—but when the Bifrost began registering activity in the upper atmosphere it spiked upward and then continued an even faster increase until a peak when the Einstein-Rosen bridge made contact with the ground, here at T-plus-four.” She glanced back and edged aside so Loki could get a look. “I wonder if the Bifrost emits some kind of radiation of its own that interacts…”

“Magic calls to magic,” Loki said. “Especially when it is as powerful as the Bifrost or the Tesseract.”

“Great, another one for the Hogwarts Express.” Tony threw his hands up in the air. “It’s not magic—”

Jane snorted. “Yeah, and you’re not standing next to alien royalty who arrived via a theoretical bridge between points in space in pursuit of the zero-point energy source three feet away. Name one of those things which is supposed to exist.”

“Hey, I’m just saying, it sounds like…”

They turned away to continue arguing, leaving Loki with the Tesseract. He had spent some time reading about it after Surtur had showed it to him in his vision, pouring over the oldest books in the library. It had been the cause of dozens of battles, and had nearly been the Allfather’s undoing when he’d gone to recover it and put it in safekeeping. Apparently not safe enough, if the mortals had their hands on it.

He moved closer, watching as the blue lights in the center of the cube swirled and eddied, like water behind a boat, as a beautiful hum filled his ears. Careful, he thought. The cube was supposed to be beautiful, dangerous, insidious, and powerful. Midgard might have only used it as a power source, but it was capable of – was meant for – so much more. What purpose its creation had had was a secret that Yggdrasil had kept to herself and left for them to puzzle out, but power wanted to be used, and often not for the same purposes as the user had in mind. It could bend the wills of those around it, as befitting the tool of a conqueror. Surtur had shown him that, too, the Tesseract held in a hand that was not fiery…

“Loki?”

Sif’s voice cut through the hum and it abruptly stopped. Loki realized he had one hand out, reaching toward the Tesseract, quickly let his arm drop before looking back at his wife. She had one eyebrow raised, but worry was plain on her face, and he could not miss how her own hands had clenched, how she seemed ready to launch herself through the thick glass to get to him if she needed to.

He raised an eyebrow in return, and she nodded slightly and dropped her hands from the sill. Loki took a moment to inhale, and tried to calm himself on the exhale. It did a little good, but not as much as he’d have liked, given present company. He couldn’t afford to seem nervy.

“If you don’t mind,” Jane said, and he turned back toward her as she spoke. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Thor lean over to speak in Sif’s ear, and pursed his lips when she smiled at what he said. “I’d like to ask your help on this data analysis. Whatever Tony says, I’d like to know more about how magic works with this thing and with the Bifrost, and how they interact.”

“Thor has asked for a bout.” Sif looked up at his brother, a smirk playing about her mouth. “Why, I have no idea, as he is woefully out of practice and will only be disappointed if he hopes to beat me —”

“I am no fool,” Thor insisted. “But should those creatures attack again, I must be ready, and I know
nobody better to prepare me than the Lady Sif.”

“Hey,” Tony said, looking up from where he’d been messing with some of the tools on the lab bench. “I’m a good opponent. I was totally kicking your ass before those things showed up.”

“I do not dispute it,” Thor replied agreeably. “Perhaps tomorrow you and I can have a rematch, and you can test your armor against the considerable skill of the finest warrior Asgard has.”

They walked off, laughing, and Loki watched them go. He knew he ought to trust Sif – he did trust her. She was not faithless, nor would she break her oaths, though there was more to it than oaths and morals. But ever had it been golden Thor against shadowed Loki, and even though he was king, he could not put aside the brother who had thought only of his own glory, almost to the expense of everything else that mattered.

“Hey, Loki!”

He took another breath, schooled his face into neutrality, smiled politely as he turned back toward Jane and Tony. Better to keep it to himself, for now. He needed his wits about him.

“Shall we begin?”

* 

Jane ran her hands through her hair before tying it back from her face. “Your brother seems pretty nice,” she said. “And he’s an amazingly quick study – I see what you mean about him being intelligent, it only took him about an hour to start picking up on our physics terminology and not much longer than that to start using it correctly in interpreting data. He explained some of his magical theory too, though I’m still not entirely sure where that fits into our current understanding of physics here on Earth. Or if it fits in.” She paused to wash her face – it felt good, like scrubbing away a layer of dirt. She always felt gritty after working with the Tesseract.

“He started coming up with some particle field interaction ideas too, once he got a rudimentary grasp on them – he seemed to appreciate my help in explaining some parts, too. He wrote some of it out – half of it looks like something that should be carved on a stone in a museum, but the physics is – it’s something else, it really is, elegant and completely in line with what we’ve got as far as data. I’m going to come up with a list of things I mean to ask him tomorrow, about the Bifrost and…”

Thor, sitting on the edge of their bed and stripped down for sleep, let her words flow over and through him like water. He was not his brother and could not so easily understand her work, but he knew it helped Jane to talk through things. She had done it often enough when they had been searching for Asgard. The sound of her voice was soothing to him.

“Hey. Midgard to Thor.”

His shoulders twitched and he realized Jane was standing in front of him in her pajamas, a little smile on her face. “You were galaxies away,” she said quietly. “Everything all right?”

“I am fine, Jane. Today has simply been… long.” Thor dragged a hand over his face, and took hers with the other when she offered it, sliding onto his lap. “My brother, the king – and it seems to suit him – but it was never meant to happen. And something troubles him.”

“Maybe it’s just this business with the Tesseract. He told us a bit more about Surtur, while we were waiting for a data analysis to conclude. This guy sounds like…” she waved her free hand. “…something out of a comic book. Guess the mythology wasn’t so far off in the nastiness factor.” She bit her lip. “Thor, you know when Ragnarok happens, the myths say Loki and Surtur are on the
same side?"

"The myths are not us," Thor replied. His hand stroked her thigh, her hip. "I have read them as well, over these last months. They also say Sif and I are married. Ha!" That made him smile. "I had thought Sif never wished to marry at all. She is a born warrior… and now she is queen. My brother’s wife."

"That must be weird. You told me the three of you grew up together."

"Weird does not begin to describe it, for Loki is one I never thought would wed either. I wished him happiness – I do still, of course – but if he married I think we both imagined it would be for matters of politics."

"Maybe that’s what this is. I don’t know Sif that well yet, but if she’s a warrior, maybe she felt she had to."

"Perhaps."

He trailed off, and they both sat there in silence. Faint sounds from outside – the murmur of guards, the occasional vehicle engine – were the only sounds, apart from the hum of the air vents. Jane finally looped her arm around his shoulders and kissed him, and as ever, it chased away the darkest thoughts.

"It’ll keep until morning," she said. "We’re all tired, we’re all stressed. Nobody thinks straight like that, not even ridiculously dressed aliens. Besides, it sounds like everyone wants a crack at you tomorrow morning, so you’d better get some rest before all that smashing. I know I’m messed up by all this. Headaches and nausea, it’s awful."

She slid away from him and crawled under the blankets, rubbing her forehead as she curled up. Thor followed a moment later, wrapping her up warmly against his chest after he turned off the lights.

"No matter what happens, Jane," he whispered as he felt her breathing slow and her body relax against his, "I will keep my promises to you. I will take you to Asgard."

*  

The lights of the city glowed in the distance, shivering as the desert let off its heat. Sif wished that some of that heat could find its way here; they had been given a room in another building than where the Tesseract was kept, thankfully, and it was above ground, but frigid air was being pumped in from somewhere. It made gooseflesh rise on her skin and Sif wrapped her arms around herself, wishing for a proper hearth or one of the pile of furs on their bed, or something. Her armor had been laid out on a table in the room, and her tunic and leggings were not enough to keep her warm.

The door to the bathing room clicked open, and Sif watched as Loki’s reflection stepped out, running a hand through his hair. It was getting too long, she thought. They’d have to cut it soon. He turned off the light – having seen her wince when they were shown to their room, he had conjured up glowing golden spheres that were the same brightness as the lights in the palace and that followed them around the room – and walked over to stand beside her. She studied his profile, the way a muscle in his cheek jumped.

"At least we aren’t underground," she said at last. "I was beginning to feel like a dwarf, with the warren of rooms and tunnels below us."

Loki snorted quietly. "Dwarves are tedious, but I see their logic in putting most of their dwellings underground."
“Oh?”

“It’s safer.”

She snorted. “And when did you know me to desire the safer path, Loki? It goes against my very nature.”

Inside, though, she had to agree with him. With the corpses of the attacking force still being hauled off somewhere, and with the Tesseract so close, Sif wondered if anywhere nearby was safe. After a minute she took Loki’s hand and pulled him toward the bed wordlessly, not bothering to move to the opposite side to slide in; with how the day had gone, she was certain they’d end up a tangle of limbs and blankets anyway. The memory of the Tesseract’s power crawling over her skin made her want nothing more than to chase it away however she could. Sure, Thor had arranged for another bout in the morning, and Tony Stark had vociferously made it known he’d be in attendance, but neither of them were Loki. And if Loki spoke of the truth to his brother…

Her head hurt with so much inside it, and as she shucked her clothes and crawled under the blankets, Sif pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “I cannot understand how you spend so much time thinking without going mad,” she told Loki. “A little more thoughtfulness is a good thing, but too much is painful.”

“Give the excess to Thor,” Loki muttered as they laid down and started the process of getting comfortable in the unfamiliar bed. “Midgard has cured him of many of his maladies, but certainly not all of them.”

“Your brother does suffer from a terrifying condition.” Sif propped herself up on her elbow to look down at him. “You do mean to talk to him, of course.”

Loki did not meet her eyes right away when he spoke, which put her on edge. “Before we leave for Asgard again,” he replied. “I will speak to him.”

Sif narrowed her eyes. “Loki Odinson – oh, do not give me that look, it is your name - you will speak to Thor sooner rather than later, or you will have a reckoning from me that will make all others seem like a slap on the wrist.”

“Why do you care so much for it?” Loki asked her, and she bridled at the snap in his voice. “Thor did not believe in your desire to become a warrior at the start.”

“Thor is my friend,” Sif replied, her fingers gripping her husband’s forearm. “And now he is my brother, through you. It will do you both good to have this out between you, rather than letting him go on in ignorance and you go on in pain.”

They stayed like that a moment longer, then Sif relaxed and laid against him again, and he curled his arms around her after a moment. She sighed.

“Whatever there is between you,” she continued softly, “Thor is your brother. I can hardly imagine one of you without the other coming to mind in some way – we three grew up together, we were all friends – and we both know we need him, besides. Do you not think him worthy of knowing the truth? Have your own experiences not taught you the value of that?”

Loki went very still. “It is a pain that goes so deep,” he said, and she could hear it in his voice, the strain that came with all the long years of history between him and his brother, the difficulty he had in opening this last part of himself, even to her. “It is hard not to think of Thor as he was, rather than as he is now.”
“Your brother believes in you. As do I.” Sif reached up, fingertips trailing over the planes of his face, the shapes she knew by heart now. “Thor may be angry with you—"

“May be?”

“—but he will do his best to forgive, or at least understand at first. But he deserves to hear it from you, rather than secondhand.”

Loki was silent a long time, so long she though he had fallen asleep and ignored the whole thing, but at last he stirred. “Perhaps he does deserve it,” he murmured. She knew that was as close to a concession as she would get tonight. He knew well she was not going to let him out of this, but she also knew there had been no good moment for it today.

It all pressed in on her then, the entirety of the last two days; Surtur’s attack on Asgard, the sudden need to go to Midgard, the Tesseract and its strange energies and the way Loki’s face had looked, cast in blue light as she’d watched everything Loki fade from his eyes when he reached out to it, the strange people and the strange buildings and the realization at dinner that they would be here longer than they had wanted to be.

“I do not like this place, Loki,” she said against his skin. “It is too… small. Everything is close, everyone keeps their thoughts closer. And the Tesseract…”

“Everyone is on edge,” he replied, and she felt him start to stroke her hair. He had some kind of fixation on it, but right now she did not mind. “It is not just our arrival, nor is it only Surtur’s threat or the Tesseract. Something else is afoot here.” Loki wriggled his shoulders a bit and pulled the scratchy blanket up over her shoulders. “We will… well. Tomorrow will be an illuminating day, I imagine.”

Sif closed her eyes and let the motion of his hand soothe her. If Loki had problems letting his thoughts out to his wife, then she still had problems admitting her own weaknesses, but… she would have to trust Loki. The thought, her last before she drifted into an uneasy sleep, was not an unpleasant one.

*

“Okay,” Tony said, helmet tucked under his arm. “You sure you wanna do this, big fella? You still can back out, I’m sure Xena over there won’t tell on you to your little bro.”

Thor grinned, twirling Mjolnir in his hand. It felt good to have the weapon back, and it did much to dispel the unease that had settled on his mind last night. “I am afraid not, my friend,” he replied. “You asked for a rematch, and you shall have it. And I believe the lady will speak for herself.”

“The lady will,” Sif affirmed, her voice wry. Thor heard a note of Loki’s kind of humor in it, and wondered again for a moment about her and his brother. Their marriage had surely been a political one, but…

“Let’s hope we’re not interrupted by space monsters this time. You hear that?” Tony tilted his head up to the sky. “You want another crack at him, you wait your turn!”

“You’re stalling,” Sif told him. “Nervous?”

Tony snorted and slipped his helmet over his head, the eye-slits lighting up as it whirred into place. “Yeah, right. Some dude with a hammer – admittedly those are some big muscles there, but I never liked them big like that – against the best tech in the world. Sorry, your boy here doesn’t stand a—”
Thor swung Mjolnir, connecting it solidly with the armor over Tony’s stomach. With an electronic wheeze, Tony flew backward, sliding twenty feet across the ground before his shoulders slammed into a concrete planter beside one of the walkways between buildings. Thor stood on the grass still, looking at Tony with interest. Sif was laughing.

“Okay,” Tony said, getting to his feet. “Okay. Payback for that sucker punch yesterday. That’s cool. I get it.” He dropped into a crouch, HUDs going red, bioscanners collecting and processing and displaying data. “The kid gloves are comin’ off, though.”

“Oh, he was going easy on you, Thor,” Sif called from her perch. “That hardly seems fair. One does not improve if one is not challenged.”

“I would not have you hold back, Tony Stark,” Thor said, gripping Mjolnir and moving into a ready stance himself, his cape billowing slightly in the hot midmorning wind. “Let us fight as equals.”

Tony put his hands up. “Have it your way.”

It was interesting to watch them, Sif thought. Tony was no tactical expert, that was certain, but he made up for it in willpower and strength. That, she thought, said a lot about his character. Battle was more revealing of a person’s worth than most realized, and for a human to be able to pick himself up and continue fighting, even in the face of an opponent more advanced, was admirable.

After they had been at it for some time, Loki came out of the research building and joined her, and they both glanced up as one of the strange machines they’d seen parked on the wide expanse of paved land around the compound lifted off with a whine and streaked overhead. Loki watched it until it was out of eyesight, then adjusted the high collar of his coat. He wore one of his more casual outfits today, suitable for what work he was doing in the lab, she supposed.

“Fury,” Loki murmured, his eyes on Thor and Tony. “He was being more irritating than necessary in the lab when he got some kind of urgent message and had to depart. No great loss.”

Sif narrowed her eyes as Tony fired some kind of beam of energy at Thor and it shot him backwards. Some kind of Midgard magic? Loki would probably know by the finish of the day, the way he was looking at Tony. Of course, that could have been because Tony was now defending against another series of hammer blows. Sif had to admit that the mortal was holding his own, and what he lacked in refinement (she supposed, in the short lives of humans, there was no opportunity to spend hundreds of years perfecting movements) he made up for in enthusiasm. Still, she could not help crowing victory when Thor dropped him to the ground and put Mjolnir on his chest to keep him from getting up for a full minute.

“Jesus,” Tony muttered, popping up the faceplate of his helmet. When he realized that Sif and Loki and a good number of SHIELD personnel who didn’t have anywhere pressing to be were watching him, though, he put a hand on his hip. “Look, even experience can fall before enthusiasm. You’re like a puppy with a new bone.”

“Thor has held Mjolnir for the last four hundred years.” Sif’s tone was conversational, if amused. “I think he may have you on experience, Tony Stark.”

“Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“He reminds me of Fandral,” Loki muttered.

“Who?”

“One of the Warriors Three.” Sif leaned forward. “He has a rather flamboyant attitude.”
“Hey, I can dig flashy. Zap him down, I’ll go up against him.”

“Would that I could introduce you to him, and the rest of the Warriors Three,” Thor said, smiling wistfully. “Volstagg and Hogun are truly worthy of their oaths, but I think my brother has the right of it. Fandral is more akin to you.”

“Well, what’s stopping you?” Tony flipped his helmet closed and held his arms out to the sides, looking up at the sky. “Hey! Earth to Asgard! Beam me up, Scotty!”

“Don’t think that’s how it works, Mr. Stark,” Coulson called from where he’d been standing so unobtrusively that not even Sif had noticed him.

“Heimdall would not open the Bifrost to me – the peace between Jotunheim and Asgard is conditional upon my continued exile, and I would not—“

Thor paused, his brow furrowing. Sif was giving Loki that same look she had yesterday when they had first arrived, that mix of expectation and – apprehension? – and a complete lack of amusement. Loki had blanked his face again. Tired of being left out of whatever was going on, Thor dropped Mjolnir to the ground and crossed his arms.

“There is something else,” he said. “Beyond Jotunheim, beyond Mother not wishing my return. I would have you tell me, Brother.”

Sif and Loki shared another look – some unspoken conversation in expressions and raised eyebrows and the turn of lips that he could not read – and at last Sif stood and dusted off her leggings.

“Stark,” she called. “This place is too small for the thrashing I intend to give you. I have seen a bigger space beyond this building – let us go there.” She looked round at the onlookers. “All of us.”

There was a command in her voice that got many of the people who were interested in watching to start moving on. Tony’s eyebrows had shot up, but he shrugged.

“Don’t know how much space you need to figure out you don’t bring a sword to a gunfight, Joan of Arc, but I’ll follow along wherever you wanna go.”

With a last significant look at Loki, Sif turned on her heel and marched off round the corner of the building. Tony fired up his repulsors and shot up into the air, arcing over the rooftop after her. And then they were alone.

Loki had that look about him that he had sometimes had – there were tells to his moods, and as painfully oblivious as Thor had been he knew them still. Loki’s hands were his tools, and so he fidgeted with them, one blunt thumbnail sliding along the crease of the opposite palm, the fingers lacing and then splaying out, a subtle warding gesture that even Thor could pick up on. Loki was uncomfortable, Loki wanted to put a shield between himself and Thor, Loki was scared.

Thor knew better than to call attention to that, though. Well, now he did, anyway; before, he probably would have rushed this puzzle head-on, distraught at the fact his brother was distressed enough to show how he felt so plainly. Instead, he waited another long moment, and then put his hand on Loki’s shoulder. “What troubles you, Loki?” he asked gently. “I would know my brother’s mind.”

“What troubles me?” Loki laughed hollowly, the raw sound of it grating in Thor’s ears. “Where would you like me to start? No, I know. Would you like to go home?”

Thor gave him a quizzical look. The fear in his brother’s eyes began to scare him too, for it seemed...
to be that Loki was afraid of him, and that could not be right. He was not speaking sense, however. “You know I cannot. You told me yourself.”

Loki spread his hands. “I lied.”

His brother had always been known for his ability to spin tales – indeed, it was one of Loki’s crowning glories, a skill with which he was rightfully proud, for in his silver voice, punctuated by gestures with his long-fingered hands that sometimes spun off little magical illustrations, the deeds of Thor and Loki and their companions had been told to the halls of the Palace and in Gladsheim itself. But he had not been called Silvertongue without reason, and his skill at spinning lies right alongside his tales of glory had earned him a reputation. The idea that Loki would lie to him made Thor’s heart stop, and a thousand questions flashed through his mind, but the one that made it out was simple.

“Why?” When Loki didn’t answer him, Thor reached out and took Loki’s other shoulder, not so gentle as before. “Why, Brother, why would you tell me this?”

“Is it not obvious?” Loki snapped. “You were stupid enough to go running off to Jotunheim, to nearly get all of us killed, and when Father banished you and then fell into the Odinsleep—”

“You told me Father was dead!”

“Did I?” The insincerity of Loki’s surprise nettled Thor, and hurt him. They had always had their disagreements – they were brothers, after all – and coming to Midgard he had realized that how he had treated his brother had not always been the best, but Loki had never given any indication of this kind of anger. “It must have been one of my jests.”

“This is not a joking matter, Loki.” Thor let his brother go with a shove, hard enough to make Loki take a step back, and turned away. “So you only wanted me out of the way—”

“I wanted to finally make you see that you were reckless and destructive and—”

—so you could be king—“

“I never wanted it—“ Loki cut himself off, his eyes hard. “But then, I never would have had it. Only a true son of Odin could sit on the throne, and if I am anything at all, I am not that.”

“Now you speak in riddles.” Thor turned back to him. “Speak plainly, Loki. If you want me to understand, then you cannot wrap it all in knots.”

Loki had gone very still now – angry, yet, but there was something else, some darkness that Thor could not fathom. Then again, if he had tried to understand how his brother, whom he had treated poorly but still loved, had become this man before him…

“Do you really want to know, Thor?”

There was anguish in those words, but he could barely hear it for the rushing in his ears. “Tell me.”

Loki told him.

*  

Thunder rumbled, and from across the compound, Sif looked up from where she had a boot firmly planted on the back of Tony’s suit. Lightning crackled overhead as she watched, and the distraction was enough for Tony to fire his repulsors and shoot out from under her. The shift in footing knocked her off her feet. When Stark offered her his hand though, she took it and got back up, staring off in
the direction of ominous dark clouds lit by lightning and a strange glow she could only assume was Loki working some of his magic.

“Is that normal?” Tony asked, popping his faceplate to look. He sounded worried – gods above, he’d barely known any of them and he sounded worried.

Sif felt her heart twist as thunder rumbled again, following a red streak through the air. She could not see Loki in this light, but she did not doubt he was there. They needed to do this, she reminded herself firmly. Even beyond Thor deserving to know the truth, to not go on thinking that his father was dead and his mother had rejected him, beyond Loki needing to do it so that he would no longer be so burdened, it needed to be done.

She could tell her husband that all she wanted, but Loki needed to see for himself that brotherhood was not solely a matter of blood. Had Thor not been as a brother to her even before she married into his family?

“It is not entirely unexpected.” Sif forced herself not to grimace when she heard a crunch and the sound of shattering glass, and looked over her shoulder at Coulson, who was talking quickly into his earpiece. “If there are people in these buildings, it would be wise to get them below ground. I do not think this will last long, and they may take it elsewhere, but I do not think either of them would want to know they were responsible for more death.”

“Already on it, Your Majest—” Coulson ducked as a dark streak in the sky resolved itself into Loki hitting the ground between them, kicking up a plume of grass and soil as he slid. He barely had time to get to his feet and throw a spell that seared Sif’s skin with the heat of it before Thor had grabbed him by the collar again and borne them both back up into the sky.

“Is this what sibling fights are usually like, where you’re from?” Tony asked, and put his hands up when he saw Sif’s face. “Sorry, sorry. Too soon.”

A green flash silhouetted one of the buildings, and lighting flashed again, several strikes arcing down to wherever Thor had summoned it.

Stars and Branches, Sif thought. Let them settle it quickly. Let it end before they send each other to Valhalla.

*  

Twisting in the air, Loki flicked his fingers and drove spikes of ice into the weak points of Thor’s armor. Hundreds of years fighting together guided him, and yet, underneath the hot rush of this fight, there was guilt in using it against his brother.

He grunted as Thor dropped him and he rolled into some kind of prickly bush lining one of the walkways, but was on his feet again and moving, leaving an illusion of himself behind so he could flank Thor and throw a spell that had him doubled over and wheezing.

“Do you still wish to understand?” he snapped. “Do you not see it, as I do? That all the years I spent trying to prove myself to Father, denying the truth even to myself – that those were all a waste, for who would ever let a Jotun sit on the throne of Asgard? How could an animal ever compete with someone so shining as you?”

“You lied to me!” Thor shouted back. “You lied to me, you made me believe I was abandoned by everyone I care for!” His eyes held hurt and anger of his own. “You lied.”

“My life was a lie!” Loki fist his hands in his hair for a moment, and inside, Thor’s heart ached to
see his brother and his first and dearest friend so in pain. “Do you know how it feels, Thor, to look at
your skin and know that just underneath is the skin of a monster? I could not even tell Sif, and oh, I
paid dearly for it—“

“One ill deed does not excuse another.” Thor’s fingers twisted around Mjolnir’s handle.

“But it makes the slide so much easier.” Loki glared at him, hands clenched, the faint glow of a
gathered spell shifting around his fingers. “Why do you try, Thor? And why do you hold back?”

“Because you are my brother—“

“I am not your brother!”

Thor got to his feet, teeth bared as he swung Mjolnir; Loki sidestepped easily, and the hammer drove
into the ground. Then Thor’s fist connected with his jaw and white-hot anger blossomed in his chest.
He had never been better than Thor at this, had never considered it very elegant or really his style,
but with a snarl, Loki let fly with a punch of his own.

It connected, and for a moment shock was all he could see on Thor’s face. Loki was surprised too –
Thor had always been able to block him when they fought like this – but then again, neither one of
them were really fighting with their full wits about them.

Then it was on, Thor tackling Loki to the ground, pinning him so he could not squirm away – Loki
conjuring another illusive double and getting out anyway – punching and kicking and biting and
pulling hair across the grass that was more dirt now, scorched and overturned.

Thor’s fist caught him under the jaw, snapping his head back, and Loki flew through the air,
crashing through a window and disappearing into the building. It was an easy hop for Thor, up onto
the window ledge, and easier still to find Loki, laying still among the toppled desks and sparking
computers, breathing hard. Thor didn’t care that he was stomping hard enough to crack the floor
tiles, for his eyes – anger and hurt of his own plain as day in them – were only on his brother. He
grabbed the lapels of Loki’s jacket in one hand and hauled him off the floor, slamming his shoulders
into a pillar.

“Did you think to keep me here forever, then?” Thor growled, holding out his other arm.
Mjolnir flew into it and he held it ready. “To keep your secrets? To maintain my exile until Father awakens
or until the end of days itself?”

“I don’t—“ Loki coughed. Thor had him off the floor entirely, the collar of his shirt tight around his
throat. “—think that’s entirely relevant any longer—“

“Enough!” Thor slammed him back again, and Loki gasped in pain. The pillar buckled with the
force of it. “You never answered me - why, Loki, why in all the realms would you do this?”

“Because for once I had no competition! For once, I was not the little brother, underfoot, unwanted –
I could show everyone that I belonged, that I was just as much a man of Asgard as you are! That was
all I wanted – all I ever wanted, to show I was your equal, I never wanted to be king, only to show
Father that I was a worthy son as well as you!”

Stunned – for this could be nothing but the truth – Thor eased his brother’s feet to the floor slowly,
his fingers loosening. But Loki wasn’t done. Once his confession had started, it seemed to be a flood,
and Thor wondered how long Loki had kept this inside of him, how long it had festered as everyone
let him pick and worry at his scars rather than tend to him.

“And then – after your coronation, when you took us to Jotunheim, a thing I had never intended –
after I found out I was a monster and you were banished and I had to take the throne—“Loki’s voice had become strained, the anger replaced wholly by something else now, something smaller and tighter and darker, and it showed on his face. “—I had a chance that I never did before, a chance to prove myself—to prove to myself that I belonged. Do you see it now, Thor? I had a chance, and I—” he choked for a moment “—and I had Sif, and I did not want either taken from me. I did not want things to go back to how they were before, not when I had it all in my hands, so I lied to keep it, because I do it so impeccably. And then Surtur…”

Resignation, Thor realized. Resignation, hot defiance, anger, sadness, fear, resentment; none of them things he had ever wanted his brother to feel toward him.

“I will not—“ he stopped, stepping back and dropping Mjolnir to the floor. “Loki, in my exile, I—“ no, that wasn’t right either. At last Thor sighed, dropping his head. “I fear I do not have your skill with words, Brother,” he said at last. “And an apology that should have been given long before now will not heal the wounds we have caused each other, nor will it fully forgive your actions.” Loki looked away, but said nothing, and Thor took that as acceptance. “But I see now, I understand what I should have understood, and I… I will not take away what you have. All that I ought to have said, I have not said, and all that I ought to have done I have not done, but we need not carry these things any longer.”

“I cannot let go of what I am, Thor.”

“What you are?” Thor reached out, and though Loki flinched at first when he put his hand on his brother’s shoulder, it was only in pain and not in fear. “You are my brother, Loki, whatever your birth. You may run from that truth all you like, but that does not make it less true. And I will never stop believing it. My brother is not a monster. Even if you do not think so, Loki, I do.”

For a moment Loki was still as stone, and then he raised his arm and put his hand on Thor’s shoulder, completing the circle. Still silent, but Thor smiled for both of them.

“I am sorry,” Loki said at last. Thor resisted the urge to thump him on the shoulder (he could feel that it was hurt, and seemed to remember slamming Loki into a wall on that side), and instead squeezed gently and let his arm drop.

“Let us not speak of it again. It is ended.” Not forgiven—the hurt was still raw in Thor’s heart, but he could not stay angry at Loki for long. In time, forgiveness would come.

They walked over to the window ledge again. Loki kicked out some of the jagged glass and sat heavily, dangling his legs over the edge like they were boys back in the palace. Thor cleared a space and followed suit, and they sat for a time without saying anything.

“I did not hurt you too badly when I slammed you into that pillar, did I?”

“Hm? Oh, no, my back will recover, I’m sure. That gout of flame I threw?”

“Singed, but I am unharmed. I have endured worse.”

“Good.”

“Verily.”

Silence.

“Are the two of you done?”
The brothers leaned forward to peer down at Sif and Coulson, standing on the rubble-strewn walk below. Sif had her arms crossed, and even Coulson appeared more dour than usual.

“If you’re finished demolishing the base, we’d like to start cleaning up now,” he said. “And Dr. Foster would like a word with both of you, when you’re ready. I think she’s actually waiting for you back in the lab, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll be along presently.” That was not his brother speaking but a king, one who grew ever more confident in his place. Coulson nodded and turned away, picking between blocks of concrete and piles of dirt as he headed inside. Sif stayed, glaring up at both of them.

“I suppose you both think you’re being clever right now, sitting up there after all this,” she snapped at last.

“Not particularly.” Loki’s tone had shifted again, now that it was just the three of them. Thor had never heard it this before, and while he would never say anything Loki did was soft, that was the closest he could come to describing it to himself. “In fact, I feel a distinct lack of cleverness right now.”

“As you ought. At least you did.”

“I did tell you to have more faith in me, Sif.”

She was quiet, and that same strange expression that Loki wore passed over her face too. “You did,” she said. “And I did.” She looked over at Thor and smiled a little before turning and walking off herself. Thor watched Loki watch her go.

“Mother arranged our marriage,” he said at last. “I am certain she’s thrown some plot of Father’s into disarray, but I cannot say I consider that a terrible thing.”

“I cannot either. You and Sif have always suited each other well in many ways.” Thor looked at his friend’s retreating back for a long moment. Loki had been ever secretive about his feelings, and Thor had wondered if Loki felt anything for anyone, but now that it was in the open Thor felt that commenting on it would be a poor decision. So he put his hand on Loki’s shoulder again. “Strange as it is to see, I am glad for both of you. Asgard is surely better for having both of you as its rulers.”

The way Loki’s mouth lifted into a smile at the corners made Thor’s heart glad. He had not seen his brother smile in a way that reached his eyes in far too long. “It is just as well,” he replied. “She is a far more adept warrior than I will ever be. Can you imagine me at the head of our armies, Thor?”

“Hardly at all.”

“Exactly.”

They lapsed into a much more comfortable silence for a while, watching as people started coming out of the buildings and cleaning up the walkways.

“Jane did ask to see you,” Thor said at last. “And you should have your wounds cleaned, at least, though Midgard’s healing is… different than ours.” Loki kicked his feet and let them swing.

“We’ve got a bit yet. If you do not mind sitting here, that is.”

“I don’t.”

When Loki’s smile widened just a bit more, Thor knew he’d made the right call.
In its cradle in the lab, the Tesseract pulsed several times, and the monitors around it went fuzzy with static for a moment. Jane, with her back turned and her notebook out, didn’t notice.

It was not pleased; one of the new arrivals was ill-suited to its purposes, but the other all but called out to it. It had nearly been successful, too, but something, some alien force that the Tesseract did not know, had rebuffed it.

No matter. It had waited thousands of years. A little while longer would be less than a drop in the bucket.

The Tesseract waited.

*  

“You are all failing me!”

The court cringed away from their lord, the front rows sweltering in the combined heat of the realm and the heat rolling off Surtur in his rage. The one in the center, the one who had commanded the scout teams sent to Midgard, flattened its snout to the polished obsidian floor.

“Forgive me, Master,” it whined. “The teams I sent, they were less than competent, and—“

“So you tell me you did not send your best to retrieve it?” Surtur hissed. “Cur!”

“We thought it a simple matter, Master, please, we did not think—“

“Oh, that much is abundantly clear.” The twilight blade whistled as Surtur swung it through the air, the hilt flipping in his hand easily. “You fools did not realize that the Tesseract is not some bauble, not some child’s toy. You sent the sons of fools to retrieve a thing that belongs in the hand of a king!”

“Master, I will—“

“—do nothing, for you are far too incompetent to be trusted with something so important.” Surtur paced back and forth a moment, and the court held its breath.

“Clearly I have to be more direct – both with you idiots, and with the mortals,” he breathed. “I will have orders for you within the hour. Prepare yourselves as you see fit.”

He watched the assembly scurry for the exits, all hastening to be the first to obey him. When he spied the scout team commander trying to sidle out, Surtur grinned. He was angry that he had to expend more effort for what should have been an easy task. Luckily, rectifying the situation would be no great loss to him.

“Not you,” he said, crooking a clawed finger. “You failed me. You remember the price of failure, what I told you when you came to swear your allegiance?”

“Please, Master, no, I will do better, I will send my best, I will—“

“—do nothing,” Surtur finished, pulling his blade out of the commander’s chest and watching the black blood slide off, leaving the sword clean.

If he failed again, Surtur thought, there was only one option left.
Everything would burn.
As ever, my wonderful betas who put up with all my whining are credited with this chapter not being awful. Their constant encouragement as this thing ballooned alarmingly is what gets me through those long tea-less nights.

*parallax:* a displacement or difference in the apparent position of an object viewed along two different lines of sight.

Fury’s boots hit the deck almost as soon as the quinjet landed, hopping out of the back hatch before it had a chance to lower fully and striding across to the access hatch. It had less to do with his urgency and more with the fact that the Helicarrier hadn’t descended to an altitude where breathing without an attached oxygen mask was easy, but that didn’t diminish the importance of the calls he had to make. He wouldn’t have left the mess in Albuquerque for anything less than this.

The hatch popped open with a hiss and Fury shouldered his way in. The SHIELD agents he passed in the halls on the way to his office didn’t salute or come to attention, but the murmurs of ‘sir’ and ‘Director’ followed in his wake until he shut the door behind him and set the lock. His desk screen lit up when he did, detecting his presence, and Fury crossed the room and pressed his thumb to the biometrics box so it could confirm identity, looked into the camera for a retinal scan, and put in his numeric code.

The *Call Waiting* message popped up almost instantly after he logged in and Fury’s mouth twisted. The vultures, he thought. He’d have to find out how they knew where he was and when; he’d left Albuquerque in haste and with a tail wind had made better time than was usually possible. The Helicarrier’s IT team said there wasn’t anything in the computer code, but Fury didn’t necessarily trust the World Security Council not to buy IT off. Still, it was better not to keep them waiting too long. He tapped the icon and turned around to face the wall display.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, when the shadowed figures resolved in front of him.

“We heard you had an incident at the New Mexico research facility,” a man with an accented voice said. “We wanted to be certain that our investments were secure and unharmed.”

“The assault was unsuccessful,” Fury replied. “The compound and the Tesseract are secure.”

“And the rest?”

“The base has been sanitized and rendered safe again, and we’re in the process of developing tech to scan for future assaults. The team should have something to show me soon, and more permanent solutions in a couple of days.”

“Considering the minds you have in Albuquerque at present, we would be disappointed if it were otherwise,” one of the women said. “Tony Stark, Dr. Foster… and what about these two new arrivals?”
Fury kept his face impassive, but cursed inwardly. He wasn’t surprised they knew about Loki and Sif – they had access to the same detectors built using Foster’s research, after all, they probably had known the moment that interstellar bridge had begun to register activity – but he’d hoped to be the one to say something about it himself.

“They aren’t hostile,” he said. *Even if they’ve got attitude problems worse than Stark’s.* “The alien identifying himself as Loki is currently ruler of Asgard, and the other is Sif, the queen and their military leader. Neither one has made threats toward SHIELD, the United States, or Earth. Loki currently seems interested in working with Dr. Foster and Stark on their research of the Tesseract, but I’ve left instructions to keep him under observation. Apparently the assault on the Albuquerque facility is part of a larger ongoing war between Asgard and an entity known as Surtur. You’ll have to check the mythology on that one.”

That wasn’t the whole truth; as soon as he’d been briefed on the New Mexico situation when it had first arisen, Fury had quickly pulled together any and all information on Norse mythology and legend and begun piecing things together from the different epics. Obviously it wasn’t at all accurate, but any information they had on Surtur now would be helpful.

His eyes went from one screen to the next. “They say they’ve come to retrieve the Tesseract – apparently it’s what Surtur is after.”

“You don’t mean to give it over, of course.”

“No. Not in light of our own projects, both Pegasus – as irrelevant as that seems, now – and the others.”

“Good.”

Another member spoke up now. “Speaking of those other projects…”

“Everything’s on schedule and locked down tight.”

“See that it stays that way.” The speaker – a man, no identifiable accent in that way that trained field operatives had to mask their origins – folded his hands. “The last thing this Council wants is that knowledge falling into the hands of extraterrestrials, even ones who are friendly at present.”

“I hadn’t planned on it,” Fury replied. “I’m keeping an eye on the situation.”

“We trust that you are,” one of the women said, but her tone indicated she didn’t trust him at all. That was just fine by Fury: he didn’t trust them either, and if he didn’t *need* them for SHIELD to function, he would drop all contact with the Council at once, even if it meant coding the entire organization’s network himself to make sure there weren’t any backdoors they could sneak in through.

“Keep us apprised of any new developments. And watch our visitors; I needn’t remind you what Loki’s file says.”

“Not since I wrote most of it, no.”

“Good. We’ll be in touch.”

The screen faded back into the SHIELD eagle, but Fury stood there, staring at it for a minute longer. The World Security Council was a thorn in his side and the tether holding SHIELD back, but they also filled SHIELD’s coffers and outfitted SHIELD’s agents, and Fury had thus far found that he could at least work with them, even if he wanted to find out their identities and give them a very personal piece of his mind. Fury had other things to be concerned about, and when the fate of the
planet hung in the balance, he couldn’t afford to let his personal sentiments get in the way of decisions that needed to be made.

The next call was easier, and unlike the Council, Fury knew that this one had been scheduled on his own terms, rather than having him be at the beck and call of anyone else. “Agent Romanoff,” he said, when the feed popped up on his screen.

“Director,” she replied. He could hear the chill in her voice, though she kept her demeanor professional. “Reporting as requested.”

“Sorry to pull you away from the field,” Fury said, and meant it; Natasha Romanoff was one of SHIELD’s best and most effective operatives, and pulling her off assignment represented no small loss in the amount of intel that they could pull in, but it was one of those things he couldn’t give to anyone else. “A situation has arisen. We need you to bring in Banner.”

It was slight, but Fury caught the flicker of apprehension across her face. The fact she showed it at all was testament to how rattled she was. “Dr. Bruce Banner?”

“SHIELD has need of an expert in gamma radiation. Dr. Banner is the best, and I can’t trust this to anyone else here.” Fury leaned on his elbows. “A packet’s been sent to you.”

“I’ve already received it.” The professionalism was back. “Timeframe?”

“Take your time. I think we both know the importance of doing this one right.”

“Understood, Director.”

“Report in when you have him.” Fury terminated the transmission, waited a few moments, and then keyed in another set of encryption codes. Almost immediately the transmission was picked up. Coulson’s face swam into view on the screen. He looked slightly ruffled.

Worrisome.

“How are things going on your end, Coulson?”

“We’ve had a bit of a situation, sir. Nothing we can’t handle ourselves, but it’s done some significant damage to the base. Pegasus is untouched, but the offices aboveground and a good number of very innocent plants were harmed. Gardening is on it.”

“I’ve been gone for five hours, Coulson. What the hell happened?”

“Sibling rivalry, as far as I can tell.” Pictures – both crisp digital ones of the damage, and slightly grainy security cam footage of the fight in progress – began popping up in sidebars and along the top of the screen. Coulson’s lips flattened slightly. “I’ve been told it’s Asgard’s business and none of my concern.”

Fury watched as a red streak that resolved itself into Thor flew into view, twisting in agony as Loki drove what looked like icy daggers into his side. “Jesus. It looks awful.”

“It was pretty bad here on the ground, sir. Nothing irreparable, and no injuries among our own save for some scrapes and cuts, but they did a number on each other.”

“Well, see if you can get details. Impress upon them that while SHIELD will honor their rights as foreign dignitaries even though they are not officially recognized yet, we’re not going to stand by and let them smash up our facilities. If they feel the need to beat each other up over a grudge or
someone taking someone else’s toy or whatever, tell them to take it somewhere else.”

“Of course.” Coulson paused, reading something off a panel offscreen. “The team we put to the task has gotten the first version of their early-detection program up and running. It’s rough and dirty, but we’ve got it going on all our sensor arrays now. Better than nothing.”

“Globally?”

“Yes, though most are focused around the Albuquerque facility for obvious reasons. They’re going to refine it and redistribute it to the system as they go. They’re keeping an eye on some suspicious activity in the atmosphere, but so far there haven’t been any more events that we’ve noticed, and the scanners haven’t picked up any more alien biosigns.”

“Good. And Dr. Foster?”

“Scribbling in the lab with Stark and Loki. I’m not sure what exactly they’re working on now, but it looks complicated, sir.”

“As long as it’s keeping them out of trouble, keeping them from nosing around.”

“Everything is tight here. No evidence of any snooping.”

“With those three together, I’m sure it’ll only be a matter of time before someone gets ideas.”

“Probably, but so far they seem content to push runes and physics around on whiteboards and argue.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Fury muttered, but he doubted it would. He didn’t know Loki that well and he only knew the worst parts of Stark and he knew Dr. Foster didn’t think too highly of him, but they were the three of them brilliant minds. And I want to add Banner, someone with a damn good reason to suspect any kind of organization like SHIELD. Hope I’m not asking for trouble. Probably am, but there’s nothing to do but keep on.

“Keep me updated,” he said. “Romanoff is bringing Banner in on this. Dr. Foster said that the Tesseract was emitting gamma radiation, and he’s the expert. We’ll need his expertise on this.”

“Banner? Are you sure that’s a good idea, sir? It’s kind of a volatile environment, and, well…”

“I’m sure on this, Coulson. And if nothing else we need him close, not treating cholera in developing countries.”

He could tell Coulson wasn’t happy with it, but was glad when all the man did was nod. “Let me know when he has an ETA,” he said. “We don’t have the kind of facilities here as we do on the Helicarrier, but realistically all we’ve got to do is keep him away from the city. We can manage that.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Coulson was one of the few people Fury was absolutely certain he could trust. He had worked for SHIELD, and Fury especially, for most of his professional life. He’d earned his way to being barely a step behind Maria Hill in terms of authority, and in many ways he and Hill were both Fury’s seconds. Coulson had supported Fury’s bid to become Director, and that loyalty was something Fury intended to keep rewarding. He needed allies, as many as he could get. “If anything changes, tell me immediately. I’ll be remaining on the Helicarrier for the time being.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good. Fury out.” He cut the transmission and sat back in his chair a moment, running his hand over
his mouth. Aliens, monsters, magical cubes, gateways to other dimensions… in the last six months, the world had suddenly gotten bigger. A lot bigger, and a lot more threatening; he would have to do things that people wouldn’t like, that he himself wouldn’t like. Ultimately what he did would benefit everyone, but Fury didn’t trust everyone to see that right away.

He would have to be very careful.

*

The next morning – the next few mornings – were quiet, mostly. For all that they had finally come down from their perch together and in better spirits, Thor and Loki had avoided each other’s company as much as they could. Not out of animosity, Jane suspected, but mostly out of the need to have space and time to think, regroup, reorganize. After she’d finished yelling at him Thor had talked about it to her, of course, and Jane understood. His voice had been raw, his shoulders hunched as they had curled up together in their bed, and she had held him at the end of it. Thor felt a certain responsibility for how Loki had turned out, feeling that he ought to have seen it and done something about it, but could only shrug and say there was nothing he could do now but move forward.

Though she’d been cool with Loki (and she knew he knew why), she also couldn’t deny that he was a great help with the work they were doing on the Tesseract. It wasn’t in her nature to turn down the chance to learn – and oh, Jane learned about things she’d never dreamed of, things that sent her mind spinning down a path of impossibly complex equations and radical theories. Jane learned about the thermodynamics of conjuring fire and asked too many questions about where Loki summoned his tiny silver knives from and, above all, how the Bifrost worked and how it affected and interacted with the Tesseract. She got the sense when he answered that he enjoyed the attention and the chance to show just how smart he was – and it was frightening how quickly he picked up on things. A lot of things about him were frightening.

But Jane wasn’t going to let herself be intimidated by him, or by Tony, who covered his own boards in diagrams and neat, precise lines, letting the blend of physics and magic direct him. Between her scrawl and Loki’s angular script, they were halfway to constructing a piece of instrumentation to detect the interaction of two discrete particle fields – magical, familiar, any combination of the two. Tony couldn’t settle on a name (he kept rotating through acronyms he heard on ghost hunting shows), but that didn’t matter to her. All that mattered was the way that the equations kept scrolling on, all of it recorded by the computers and able to be manipulated by any one of them in virtual space.

Which was what they were doing now. Well, Tony and Loki were on some other topic entirely and arguing, which seemed to be their main method of communication, and Jane was staring at a particularly difficult section of theory. She was only just beginning to understand rudimentary magical theory, but she wasn’t any slouch. Something seemed off about a line of it to her, and she perched on her stool thumbing through the pages she’d dedicated to the subject in her notebook, lips pursed.

“—I’m telling you, it doesn’t work that way, you can’t just create a pocket of space—“

“As I do it regularly, it would seem you are incorrect.”

“No. No. You can’t just wiggle your fingers and wish for another dimension to hold your shopping bags.”

“Actually, it turns out that I can.” With a pointed smirk, Loki wiggled the fingers of a hand theatrically, and the tool he’d been holding in his other hand vanished. “Though wishing has nothing to do with it, nor does another dimension. I simply create a wrinkle in this one, and move it where I
“Simply, he says.” Tony spun around on his stool, leaning over the back to look at Jane. “Can you believe this guy?”

“Yes,” Jane murmured, but she wasn’t really paying attention. She reached out with a hand, touched the holographic image to highlight a section of runes, inverted it, and sat back again. “Fixed it.”

“What?”

“This line.” She pointed at the highlighted section. “It was wrong. I fixed it.”

Loki came over, eyebrows drawing together as he called the previous version up on one screen, the new version on another, and flipped between them. The line in the center of his forehead grew deeper as he did, then smoothed entirely. Jane trusted Loki’s complete lack of expression the least, but it was gone before she could comment on it, hidden behind a sort of bland amusement.

“Well done,” he said. “A difficult error for a novice to catch.”

“Well, I did,” she replied, nettled by his tone of voice. “And you didn’t.”

“He’s inscrutable,” Tony piped up from his side of the lab. “Not infallible. Isn’t that right?”

“It is close enough to the truth. I admit to underestimating you somewhat, Dr. Foster. It won’t happen again” There was a strained note in Loki’s voice, but Jane said nothing. They’d all been under a lot of stress lately, and she knew that even sufficiently advanced aliens weren’t immune to the effects of it. Mistakes happened, and knowing what she did about him, Jane couldn’t fault Loki for not liking to admit to them.

“Let’s just go through it again to make sure there aren’t any other errors,” she said. “In anything we’ve been doing. We’re close, and I don’t want all this work undone by a small mistake.”

* 

When they finished for the day, Loki made his goodbyes and left quickly, walking back along the corridor that would lead him to the residential building. He was glad he had managed to dissuade Coulson of the need for a security escort, for his brow had broken out in sweat when he’d left, and his hands clenched and unclenched as he walked, and if he had had to deal with the noise and clatter of the guards here he would have begun to develop as horrible a temper as Thor.

His dreams the last few days had troubled him – not because they were nightmares, though most of them were, but because so many of them had seemed so utterly logical, a smooth progression from his own thoughts to a dark place where the edges were all sharp. He had not been enthralled as on that first day – had actually taken pains to avoid being in the room alone with the Tesseract and avoid looking at it – but as he continued reading what texts he’d brought with them, Loki had learned that mattered little. The Tesseract unsettled everyone, but it could reach out to them too, and it was reaching out to him. It was trying to play him, and it was starting to win.

Loki ground his teeth. They had been on Midgard for longer than he had anticipated already, and he doubted Surtur would wallow in the disgrace of a failed retrieval attempt for very long. He would strike again, and soon.

Dinner had been laid for himself and Sif when he returned. She had gotten back before him – she spent most of her time showing some interested SHIELD employees how to use a sword – and was in the process of stripping off her armor. Loki shut the door and leaned back against it for a moment,
watching her at her ritual, familiar actions in an unfamiliar place.

“I doubt Asgardian steel is in danger of being scraped by anything Midgard can produce,” he said at last. Sif looked up.

“One cannot be too careful.” She rested her fingertips on the gauntlet she’d laid out. “Better not to underestimate a foe than to find oneself surprised on a field of battle.”

“Do you think we will be doing battle with these people of Midgard?” He crossed the room, shrugging out of his jacket and outer layers and letting them shimmer away until he was in only his soft undertunic.

“I think it wise to be prepared.” Sif was as tense as he was — they were both out of place, and running out of time — but finished stripping off her armor and joined him at the table. “Midgardians are strong — not in body, necessarily, but they make up for it with cunning and skill. For all that they are frailer compared to Asgardians, I would not wish to find myself their enemy.”

They passed the rest of the meal in silence. The kitchen staff here had learned quickly to send up huge portions, enough to satisfy accelerated metabolisms, but it was strange fare and less than flavorful. And as ever, his sleep was restless and disturbed, and blue.

* *

“The answer is still no.”

Loki was glad for the privacy of the room Coulson had shown him to when he’d said he wished to speak again with Fury. Maintaining his composure right now was almost as difficult as it had been at court in the beginning.

“You know you put your entire realm in danger,” he said slowly, as though speaking to a child — after all, only a child would not realize the consequences of this particular action. “You know that keeping the Tesseract here will only result in another attack, and then another, and Surtur will not stop with this base — so why do you not do the wise thing and allow us to take it?”

“Because,” and a part of Loki took great pleasure in hearing the irritation in Fury’s voice when he spoke, “The Tesseract is the only leverage we’ve got against Surtur, and I am not going to let it be taken away out of our reach.”

“You meddle with powers you could not hope to ever control.”

That seemed to amuse Fury, for some reason. “I think you’re not giving us humans enough credit. We’re not savages anymore, Your Majesty. We’re not playing with rocks and bronze axes.”

“Your technology hardly puts you on a level field with the rest of the realms.”

“But it tips the scales.”

“It would, if you knew how to properly use it.”

“Then teach us,” Fury snapped. “Because this policy of benign neglect you people have with us obviously ain’t working.”

“Teach you, so that you can use it to do what — defend yourselves? You think you can learn in days what has taken us hundreds of years to perfect?” Loki snorted, his lips twisting up into a smirk. “You think that you can control a thing that the Allfather could barely bring himself to speak of? You think
you can bend it to your purposes?"

“Yes,” Fury replied. Something about the way he said it gave Loki pause, stalled his accusations in his throat. Pieces, things he had read nights before turning to join Sif in sleep, files he had perused while in the lab with Tony and Jane, began to fall into place.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, eyes narrowed. And for the first time, Fury’s eyes flickered with something like apprehension. There but for a moment and then gone, but Loki was quick enough to have caught it. And that was incredibly interesting to him.

“That’s—“

Suddenly the room lit with a red light, an alarm sounding somewhere out in the hallway. Figures and charts and images of the area around the base started to fill the screens around him, and from the way Fury was glancing around off-screen it seemed something similar was going on where he was.

“It’s an atmospheric event,” the Director said at last. “The Bifrost is—“

“—activating,” Darcy finished, sticking her head into the room. “Sif asked me to grab you.”

“One moment,” Loki told her, and Darcy ducked back out into the hallway. Loki turned to look at the monitors, the alarms and the flashing lights and the strange Midgard technology not seeming to touch him.

“Do not think this is over, Director Fury,” he said in a low, tight voice.

The apprehension was gone from Fury’s face, and when he spoke, his own voice was controlled, clipped short at the ends as though he bit off every word. “I’ve got no illusions that we’re done, Your Majesty.”

“So long as we understand each other.”

“I think we do.”

The screen went blank, and Loki stared after it for a long moment, his jaw working. Then he turned and left the room, following Darcy as she walked down the hallway toward the elevators, turning his mind to the present situation – he had left no instructions to come after them after a certain period of time, beyond that should the need arise Heimdall would know where to send a messenger. The fact that need had arisen was of enough concern; the fact it had not spilled to Midgard, where the actual object of Surtur’s desire was, even moreso.

Darcy bounced a little on the balls of her feet as they rode up in the elevator. “So uh,” she said, “Any idea what’s going on? Why would someone be calling?”

“I cannot be sure,” Loki replied. “It cannot mean anything good.” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, and she seemed to notice and return his look with a sort of frank openness that over the last few days he’d found he rather liked. Jane had it too, and Tony Stark. Loki was used to people being guarded around him. It was quite a change to have them do otherwise.

“Well, I think we all figured that one out. But what do you think it’s about?”

The elevator stopped and the doors opened, and Loki gestured her ahead of him. “I suppose we’ll find out momentarily, won’t we?” he replied.

As they walked out into the bright sunlight Loki considered donning his helmet – he’d chosen to
wear his formal armor to speak with Fury, as befit a king addressing someone below him – but decided against it when he saw who Sif and Thor were speaking with.

“Your Majesty!” Fandral bowed with a flourish, hands spread wide. “It is good to see you in such fine fettle! We were beginning to worry that perhaps Midgard, with its many diversions, had stolen both our king and queen away—”

“It has not.”

“—though it seems that with Thor fulfilling the Allfather’s request, he—”

“Fandral.” Loki’s voice was chilly, and Fandral stopped flourishing and swallowed.

“Right, well, I suppose I shall leave that to you to work out,” he said with an uneasy smile. “I come on behalf of the Lady Frigga, who rules in your absence, my king, with dire news. Asgard is being harried by Sutur’s forces.”

Thor jerked his head around from where he’d been explaining something to Jane in a quiet voice. “What?”

“How long has this been going on?” Sif asked. She was serious now, brows drawn together.

“For two days, my queen, or nearly so. We have been repelling them most valiantly, I might add—”

“Two days, and you did not think to inform us?”

The expression on Loki’s face made Fandral’s eyes widen slightly. “We thought the first an isolated thing, my lord – it was a small force, a weak force, one easily defeated by the city guard and a few doughty warriors, myself included—but, ah, they returned that night, and have been twice more since. Your lady mother sent me to beg your return to Asgard. We cannot be without you – without both of you – in this time.”

Loki pursed his lips, thinking a moment. “We need time to discuss some matters,” he said at last. “Circumstances have changed here.”

Sif gave her husband a sharp look. “Asgard is in danger,” she said. “What more is there to discuss? We have to return.”

“I stand with Sif,” Thor said. “Asgard is our home, and we cannot let it continue to be attacked when there is something we can do.”

“We have not done what we came to do.”

“And by your face, we will not this day. But we cannot leave our own home undefended – our people need us, Loki, our realm needs us. We have tarried here long enough. Better to do this and then return to Midgard later, rather than let Asgard burn. If you—“

“Sif,” and she quieted when she felt him take her by the shoulder and saw the look he gave her. “I agree with you. But we three cannot simply rush off…”

“I’m not being left behind,” Jane spoke up from beside Thor. She had that stubborn look on her face that she often had in the lab. Thor looked down at her, and put a hand on her back after a moment of thought.

“I have a promise to Jane I mean to fulfill,” he said slowly. “If I am to go—which I would hope I am
—she comes with me.”

“You willingly put her in danger?”

“I never did anything important by playing it safe,” Jane told Loki. “Whatever we’re heading into, I can deal with it. Though,” and her face fell a little, “The Tesseract, and the particle field—“

“Whatever you guys are walking into, it sounds like you got it covered,” Tony said. He gave Jane one of his half-smiles, though there was nothing of his usual flippancy in it. “I’ll finish it, Dr. Foster,” he said. “Hell, it’ll probably be on Version 2.0 when you get back.” He leaned over to see around Thor and made a face. “Better go quick, though. Coulson and his backup dancers are coming.”

Loki glanced over his shoulder to see SHIELD agents, headed by Coulson, coming out of one of the buildings. “Then we’d best be leaving,” he said, putting a hand on Sif’s back and walking with her as they made their way over to the dark tracery of the Bifrost site. As they walked, he leaned over to speak quietly in her ear.

“Does this feel strange to you?”

She grimaced. “Do you mean that it feels as though we are being drawn off?”

“Yes.”

“It does.” She gave him a look. “But what can we do save defend Asgard? It is our home, and I will not abandon it.”

Walking behind them, Thor took Jane’s hand. “Traveling by Bifrost may be strange for you,” he began, but she grinned and squeezed his hand to quiet him.

“Are you kidding? I get to physically test my theory—or, I don’t think they’ll wait for me to get any instrumentation—Darcy, will you stay here, and—“

“You’re joking, right?” Darcy crossed her arms. “I’m not letting you go off by yourself.”

“I’m not by myself, and besides, I don’t want to put you in any danger.”

“I ran over an alien driving into some disco tornado of death which I am now going to ride into the sky to another planet.” Darcy tilted her chin up. “I’m coming.”

“I would not abandon such loyalty,” Sif called from where she was already standing with Loki and Fandral. “It does not come often.”

“See?”

“Fine,” Jane said as they took their places in the circle. “But—I don’t know, stay out of trouble.”

“I think,” Loki said, looking up as the sky darkened quickly above them, “That trouble is going to find us rather quickly, Dr. Foster. Brace yourself.”

Thor looked over as Coulson jogged across the desert dust. “I am sorry, Coulson,” he called, feeling a familiar hook take hold of a place in his belly. “But I give you my word that I will return.”

“Wait, I need—“ But the rest of Coulson’s words were drowned out as the invisible hook jerked, and they were sucked into a bright swirl of light and sound, and vanished into the sky.

*
For a moment, there was pure blackness. Then, light and heat and sound.

Jane stared ahead into the rainbow-colored swirl of the bridge, trying to absorb it, to quantify what she was seeing. Unless the mythology was more fact than fancy, she was the first human to travel this way, and Jane meant to take herself and her notebook off somewhere to record the experience as soon as she could. The problem was in finding the words, and when Jane couldn’t, she pulled her focus in closer, and started listing sensations.

Sight was first – the swirl of colors flashing by could be anything, from the stars and galaxies and nebulae they passed to shifting wavelengths in the walls of the Einstein-Rosen bridge to the interaction of the different kinds of matter, light from passing stars bent around lattices of dark matter. It could be the way that the bridge was formed, too, fluctuations from the energy source. It could be magic. Heat was easy – friction, the loss of energy from the bridge. Sound was probably her mind trying to rationalize her passage through space.

Jane was flying through space. She felt Thor’s hand in hers, and tightened her grip on it, felt his fingers squeeze hers in response. Loki was a verdant streak ahead of her, Sif just beside him and sparkling silver. If she could have turned her head she imagined that Thor’s cape would be impossibly red, and herself a smear of color, green and blue and pink and white plaid reflecting the brightness of the wormhole around them. But there was something up ahead, some shadow tinged with gold, and Jane squinted her eyes against the light trying to see—

Her feet caught on something solid and Jane stumbled but caught her balance quickly. Beside her, Darcy was standing stock-still, as though if she moved her feet she might just fall over and not be able to get back up, and whispering oh my god to herself over and over. Ahead of them, Loki and Sif had peeled off to one side of a pedestal and Fandral to the other, though Jane was finding it hard to focus with the lights dancing in her eyes still. She blinked, trying to clear them, until she realized that the lights were coming from the structure itself, and filtering in through the archway that led out.

“Welcome home, my prince,” someone said, and Jane saw that there was a man standing atop the pedestal. His armor was even more fanciful than Thor’s and bright gold, and he held a sword in his hands. His eyes were the same gold of the building.

“Heimdall,” Thor said happily. “It is good to see you again, Gatekeeper.” He tugged Jane’s hand. “This is Jane Foster.”

“I have seen you, Jane Foster.” Heimdall’s voice was deep and resonant, like the hum that was still subsiding, but somehow for all that he was imposing, Jane didn’t feel intimidated or threatened. “You are not like other mortals.”

“Um,” was all Jane could manage. An alien – she was speaking with an alien, on an alien planet, in some kind of building that managed to anchor an Einstein-Rosen bridge that she had just traveled on…

“And this,” Thor said, gesturing with his other arm, “Is Darcy Lewis, a fine companion to Jane and myself.”

Darcy looked surprised to be alive, much less being talked to, but still managed a squeaky sort of greeting. Jane could have sworn Heimdall was smiling. Well, his eyes were, at least.

“The horses are outside,” he said. “Your lady mother awaits you in Gladsheim.”

Thor looked at Jane, and even though her mind was abuzz with too many thoughts, she couldn’t help smiling in response to his own. “Are you ready?” he asked quietly.
“To meet your mother, or to be the first human to travel to an inhabited planet?” she asked as they walked around Heimdall’s pedestal – she could feel his eyes on her, itching between her shoulders, but she didn’t look back – and through the archway onto what looked like a seamless slab of crystal.

Jane’s breath left her again. Below the bridge (which wasn’t crystal at all, she realized, and was shot through with all the colors of the rainbow that danced with lights wherever it was touched) an ocean roiled and crashed against the rocks below the building. Looking left and right, she could see that the ocean didn’t extend out though, but seemed to fall off some kind of edge. Were they on the edge of some disc-shaped world? But it wasn’t just that – ahead of them were buildings, glowing gold and bronze and silver not just with their own lights, but in the glow of nebulae and galactic arms stretching across the sky.

She didn’t realize she was staring up at Asgard’s sky until Thor touched her on the shoulder and she tore her eyes away from tracing a curl of glowing gases that seemed to bracket a bright blue point in the sky.

“Ride with me, Jane,” he said quietly. She nodded, and stepped on his knee when he offered it to mount and scoot forward in the saddle so Thor had space when he got behind her.

Darcy climbed up in front of Fandral and they were off, galloping down the bridge toward the city. Jane held on tight to the horse’s mane and tried to take it all in. An advanced alien race with intergalactic travel, and they still traveled by horse and fought with weapons that were antiquated by Earth’s standards.

*Maybe it’s time to stop thinking with Earth’s standards,* she thought as huge golden gates opened before them. The tall, fluted structure in the center of the city was more visible now. Thor leaned down to speak in her ear over the rush of the wind.

“That is the palace,” he told her. “Where Loki, Sif and I grew up. This is my home, Jane.”

Then they were galloping through the city proper, though still on the bridge. She turned her head and could see people clustering on the terraces, some waving and shouting. Welcoming Thor home, she thought. A thread of doubt began to wind into her heart, and Jane did her best to put it aside.

Loki and Sif slowed as they came into a broad plaza in front of the palace, trotting along a stone path that angled along the front face of the huge building. Jane craned her neck to look up at the top, gleaming in the sunlight. Beside them, Darcy was doing the same. It was… impossible, and huge, and beautiful.

The courtyard was all pale gold stone shaded by trees, and as they trotted in, people seemed to swarm out of every door and cluster around their horses. Mostly Thor’s.

“My prince!”

“You’ve come back! Back to defend us!”

“Who’s the woman?”

“A mortal?”

“Does this mean you are to be king now in your father’s stead?”

Jane saw Loki crane his head to look back at them from where he’d handed his reins off to a stablehand. Thor caught the look, and something passed between them before Thor looked back down at the crowd around their horse. “My *brother* rules,” Thor said emphatically, spinning his
horse on its hindquarters to try and make room for them. “We have urgent business to attend, I must ask you all to see to your duties—make room!”

He slid off first and held his hands out to take Jane’s waist as she followed suit. She was conscious of dozens of pairs of eyes on her now, curious and speculating and judgmental. Her first instinct was to hunch over, to make herself small, but Jane forced herself to keep her back straight and her chin up. She was a representative of Earth, she was an astrophysicist and sure of herself. She would not let herself be intimidated.

But it was hard not to be, when every pair of eyes they passed in the palace turned to her and Darcy, scurrying along in their wake. It would have been impressive enough to see Loki striding ahead of them, his green cape billowing out behind him, or Sif who looked more at home in her armor here than she had on Earth. Even Thor, she noticed, seemed to straighten and carry himself differently. That thread of doubt wormed its way in a little deeper.

They passed through a long, curtain-hung colonnade and ascended a flight of stairs, and found themselves looking down into a huge bowl-shaped room. Up above were more levels, but the openings were draped across with green and red and gold. There were people in fine dresses and clothing clustered around the floor, though, and she heard every single one of them fall silent as they realized who it was approaching the huge golden throne at the end of the hall.

The figure on it rose; a tall, regal woman with red-gold curls piled high on her head, a crown like a spray of blue feathers across her brow. Jane could see a lot of Thor in Frigga’s face, especially in the blue eyes that widened, then filled with tears as she rushed down from the dais to embrace her son.

“Thor! You have returned to us!”

Thor’s face softened, and before he closed his eyes Jane could see them glimmering with tears of his own. “I missed you,” he said quietly, barely loud enough for her to hear it a few feet away. “I could not leave my home without defense, not when there is something I can do about it.”

“Then you come in good time,” Frigga said. “Not an hour past we were attacked again, and sent Fandral to beg the return of your brother and Sif. It is good that you have come too, my son,” she finished gently.

“I would speak with my officers,” Sif said. “We must stop these incursions at the source – find where they are coming in and where they come from. Otherwise they will continue unabated.”

Everyone swept into motion; Sif and Fandral went off toward one of the doors out of the hall, picking up other people in their wake; Loki, after giving Thor an unreadable look, took off in another direction with his own bevy of followers. For his part, Thor pressed a warm hand to Jane’s back and urged her forward.

“Mother,” he said, “This is Jane Foster, a woman of science. She studies the stars, on Midgard.” He paused, and broke into a smile. “She has done me the honor of allowing courtship, in the fashion of mortals.”

“Jane Foster.” Frigga smiled at her – gently, still, but Jane could tell there was now steel hidden in it. “Heimdall has told me of you, the mortal who searches for her answers along the branches of Yggdrasil,” she said. “I am the Lady Frigga. I have wanted to meet you for some time.”

Next to Frigga, in her gown of blue silks and palest gold, Jane could not help but feel a little frumpy. Still, she was pleased when her voice didn’t shake at all. “I’m glad to meet you,” she replied. “Thor’s told me a lot about you.”
“I am certain he has.” Frigga looked up at her son, a hand on his mail-clad arm, then back at Jane. “I would speak with you, Jane, in Fensalir. Gladsheim is grand, but it is far too much for a private talk between two ladies. It would please me to show you more of our home – for I can see Thor looking toward the war room, do not think that your mother is blind to these things,” and she gave Thor such a knowing look that Jane had to smile, because she’d seen Thor shifting and glancing after Sif, too.

“I’d like that,” Jane said, though her stomach fluttered with nerves. At least, she thought it was nerves. Maybe traveling via the bridge and the subsequent excitement were catching up to her. “But I don’t want to leave Darcy by herself.”

Darcy, who had been very interested in the gold scrollwork across the floor up until that point, looked up and put up her hands. “No, it’s cool,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt you meeting the future in-laws, Jane—”

“Darcy!”

“—and besides, I’ll be fine on my own.”

Frigga gave Darcy a very level look, though there was no less kindness in it than before. Then she made a gesture, and one of the guards came over and knelt before her. “You will escort the Lady Darcy around the palace and its grounds as she desires,” Frigga said. “And watch over her to ensure her safety, for as long as she is among us. She is an honored guest of the throne, brought here by the king and Prince Thor. Treat her as such.”

The guard bowed his head, hand fisted over his heart. “I hear and obey, my lady,” he said. At a nod from Frigga he stood and bowed to Darcy – not as low, but polite. Jane bit her cheek to keep herself from laughing at the sight of the young woman trying to curtsy in scuffed Doc Martens, and she saw Frigga’s lips twitch as well.

Darcy shot a look back over her shoulder at Jane as she was led away, an open-mouthed grin on her face. Jane did giggle at that, and the sound echoed around the hall. Thor laughed too, until they both quieted.

“Go on and go help Sif,” Jane said quietly.

“Are you certain?”

Conscious that Frigga was there, Jane still took Thor’s hands in hers, lacing their fingers. “You came back to help defend your home,” she said. “And they need you here. Go on, I’ll be fine with your mom.”

Thor seemed ready to argue the last point especially, but at a look from Jane and another from his mother he simply nodded, and then leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers, briefly but warmly. “I am certain this meeting will be short,” he said quietly. “I will return to you before long, Jane.”

She smiled at him, and untangled their fingers. “Go,” she told him, placing her fingertips on his breastplate and giving him a little push. “Or else I think they’ll be done without you.”

Jane watched him go until he turned a corner and she felt Frigga’s hand upon her arm.

“Fensalir is many levels above us,” she said, “But you have the right of it, I think, they will be done soon, for Sif is very efficient in her strategy and command. There are many terraces from here, places where we can walk and speak together, and I admit curiosity about what it is you do when you study the stars, Jane Foster.”
Always good when you know the answer to the first question on the exam, Jane thought to herself. And they did talk about her work and why she had chosen astrophysics, and from there her education and her family, and lots of little things in between. Jane wasn’t oblivious to the fact she was being grilled, but she felt she held up well. It was easy to talk to Frigga; she seemed to know how to draw out difficult answers, and when she laughed at one point and told Jane it was perfectly all right to only call her Frigga, Jane figured she’d scored a few points at least.

Thor found them as they were walking down an open-air hallway with statues on either side – heroes of the realm who had given their lives in its defense, Frigga told her – flying in between the columns and statues and landing heavily before them. The keys hanging on a cord from Frigga’s gilded belt chinked softly as she and Jane stepped back reflexively, and had this been another time Jane would have laughed at the way Frigga put her hands on her hips when Thor straightened up.

“I have told you not to do that.”

Thor actually looked sheepish. “I am sorry, Mother,” he said. “I wish to bid Jane farewell, though.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Scouts have found the base these foul creatures make their forays into Asgard from,” Thor replied. “We have decided that a strike at it, destroying and routing the camp, would stop the incursions. Sif has asked that I go with the force, and I accepted.” Thor embraced Frigga first, then went to Jane, kissing her.

“Should I give you a favor, or something?” Jane asked. Thor laughed and pressed their foreheads together for a moment.

“I already carry the greatest favor I can receive from you,” he told her. “Be well, Jane. I will return.”

With a last brush of fingers against her cheek Thor turned and, twirling Mjolnir, flew back out the way he’d come in. Frigga sighed, and together they walked out past the columns to the low wall, where they could look down into a courtyard full of milling soldiers in armor. They were far enough above that the sounds were muted, but she could still hear the rattle of mail, the whinnying of the horses and the clatter of shod hooves on stone.

Off to one side she could see Sif, Loki, and Thor standing clustered together. Thor left after a moment, going to his horse, and after he’d covered her hand on the reins for a moment and said something to Sif, she mounted up too, saying something in return that made the corners of Loki’s mouth twitch up. With a shout, Sif whirled her horse and trotted through the soldiers to the archway leading out, Thor just behind her. In a few minutes, the courtyard was empty save for the guards, and Loki looking after the riders. And in another moment, he was gone too.

“I am sure you know this,” Frigga said quietly, “But you need not fear for Thor’s safety. He has gone into situations more perilous than this.”

“I know,” Jane murmured. But she felt a knot of apprehension begin to twist in her stomach as she watched the flashes of light from the multifaceted bridge, streaks pulled up into the sky.

Asgard was a bright disc in the sky above them, but Sif’s eyes were on the ground, the encampment spread out across the field below where she crouched at the treeline with her men spread to either side and behind her. Thor had the other half of their forces, and had circled around to the other side on her orders, ready to move. It felt strange to her, commanding her prince, but Thor had insisted on
it – she was queen, after all, and according to their laws, she outranked him.

Sif pushed those thoughts away and focused on what lay before her. The encampment was a sizeable one, easily large enough to supply the kind of strike-and-fade groups that had been harrying Asgard and its attendant outposts. Too much and more was at stake for her to let Surtur get a foothold so close to Asgard when he already had a traitor in their midst.

The officer beside her tapped her forearm with a questioning look, and Sif nodded, communicating her plan with a series of gestures and settling in to wait while one of the scouts climbed up a tree to signal to Thor and his group on the other side, and Sif nodded to show she’d seen his signal of acknowledgement. Everyone shifted into position accordingly, and for a long and heavy minute Sif could feel the weight of a thousand eyes waiting for her, itching between her shoulder blades, the excitement a fizzing in her blood that made her lips curl back into a grin. It came to a boil when she gripped her glaive in both hands and burst from cover.

“For Asgard!” she cried, and heard every voice answer her. “For Asgard and the House of Odin!”

They were on the encampment before any of the soldiers wandering around had a chance to react, and as she drove her glaive home into chests and sliced through torsos and arms, and legs, Sif thought that if they’d caught them so unawares, then this would indeed be a rout. Thunder rolled across the encampment, and Sif felt elation surge in her chest as she drove her blade into the chest of a hideous troll and dropped it at her feet. Out of the corner of her eye she could see lightning flash, and hear a yell as Thor’s contingent swarmed around him.

But then she started to notice things – how nothing was coming out of the tents that surrounded them or even coming in through a portal (and she’d seen portal sites around the encampment); how whenever they would come across a knot of soldiers standing together they never reacted. And then Sif started to look at the corpses.

*These have been dead once already,* she realized, disgusted. There, on that goblin – a hastily sewn gash on its torso. A fire giant she’d taken herself had the glassy, clouded eyes of the long-dead.

The men with her had noticed she’d stopped fighting, and as the last enemy fell (though she heard the hum of Mjolnir sailing around somewhere nearby), they clustered around her, their confusion writ plain upon their faces.

“What’s going on, my lady?”

“Why do they not fight?”

Sif went to the nearest tent, pushing the flap back with the tip of her glaive – as she suspected, it was empty inside, nothing but a dimly glowing orb floating in the center that she surmised was meant to glow at night and make the tent appear occupied.

Thor came up behind her, armor splattered with black blood and mud. He looked confused. “Sif?”

“A ruse!” she snarled, and started back toward the space between the encampment and the treeline. “Rally the men to me. We’ve been misled – we must return to Asgard at once.”

Shouts rang out behind her as she stalked off, only pausing to wipe her blade on a collapsed tent nearby. She would not befoul good steel with filth any longer than she had to, and she had the sense that she would not get a chance to clean her gear until much, much later on.

Thor fell into step beside her. “What does this mean?”
“It means our attention has been taken off the Tesseract,” Sif replied, her mind spinning. “Surtur, or more likely his ally in the palace, wanted us in Asgard chasing shadows.” Sif snarled again in frustration. She had seen it and Loki had seen it. One of them ought to have remained behind, Thor ought to have remained behind… but there was nothing for it now. No way to go but forward.

“We cannot leave this any longer,” she muttered, watching as their forces – barely touched, most uninjured save for stupid mistakes among the greener ones – formed up in preparation, as the sky darkened above them. She would see Surtur’s plant gone before the day was out, or she would turn the palace upside-down to find them.

* 

It was late afternoon when they returned to the sound of ringing hooves and the jingle of harness, Sif and Thor at the head of the column with the rest fanning out around the courtyard. Even from his place Loki could see that her brows were drawn together in anger, her hands tense on the reins and the rest of her body tight. He was down the steps and at her horse’s head as soon as she reined up, Gylfi’s hooves clattering as he swung his hindquarters round.

“You return,” he said, “And with no losses?”

“No losses,” Sif repeated. She sounded disgusted. “Because there was no true battle. Corpses brought back by foul magic, a decoy camp.”

He held her horse while she dismounted, lengthening his stride to keep up with her as she stalked angrily up the steps toward the palace entrance. “So we were right.”

“And we let ourselves be fooled.” Sif hissed, and he heard the creak of leather as she gripped her glaive’s hilt tightly. “We knew it was likely to be a trap, and we walked into it like the sons of fools.”

“You said it yourself, we could not leave Asgard undefended.”

“So we wait for the next attack?” She paused a half-step, glaring at him. “We would not be in this position if we had but eliminated Surtur’s spy before.”

Then she was off again and Loki followed after as she began climbing the stairs to Gladsheim. “What do you mean to do, Sif?”

“To tear the court apart,” Sif snapped. “To upset every single scheme I find that threatens our home.” She glanced at him, and paused again, some of her anger slipping to reveal—frustration, fear – for Asgard, he suspected – a drive to do something. “You said before you know who it is. If you do know, then tell me.”

Loki watched her face, the emotions flicking across it. Sif was always keyed up after going out to battle, but this time was different. It was not just Asgard at stake now, either, though that was foremost in her mind (and his). Midgard had put itself in danger as well, and though Asgard had abandoned its stewardship of the mortals long ago, there was no way Thor or Sif or the two mortal women here would let him simply do nothing.

If it had only been as simple as plucking the cube out of Fury’s hands… but no, Loki couldn’t do that. He shoved away thoughts of the innocently glowing Tesseract and pursed his lips, thinking. Sif watched him watch her.

“Loki,” she said softly. “What do you mean to do?”

Plans within plans within plans; such was Loki’s play, thousands of little threads of light that wove
together in a hundred thousand different ways. He traced them, followed the lines to their outcomes and to the outcomes that stemmed from them, one choice and then the other, what was best and what was worst and what was only convenient. He found the thread he wanted – the thread they needed - and followed it, and saw where it lead.

“I mean to go to dinner,” he said with a smile. Sif narrowed her eyes – not just at his words, but because Loki knew that something had shown in his eyes. Around her, he could not hide half as well as he had been able to at the beginning. The need to (and the desire to) were no longer there.

“Loki, if this is some trick—“

“Oh, of course it is a trick, Sif,” he told her. “But the court is full of them. What better to stop one than another?”

She hesitated another moment, but nodded and stayed at his side as they made their way toward Gladsheim, and her presence was a comfort as his mind whirled ceaselessly. Things had changed, and the ways out of the situation were beginning to thin. It was up to Loki to pick the one with the most favorable result.

*When is it not?* he mused, and felt his mouth twist into a smirk better suited to the man who had sat uneasily upon the throne months ago. *Who else can extricate us all from this? In the hands of this king and queen, victory is all but assured.*

He did not want to think of the many more threads that lead to failure.

*…and returned to Asgard after realizing this,”* Sif finished.

The hall was quiet; for once, the courtiers were beginning to realize that matters were serious. Asgard had been tricked. That had never happened in the memory of some of those present. Some were glancing at Loki – as king, it was in part his responsibility to discern these things and avoid them – and some were looking askance at Sif, who was in command of their military. For her part she bore the scrutiny well, proud as ever, queenly as ever. She was playing her part in this little show admirably.

“While it is indeed good that the people of Ringsfjord are safe,” Loki said after he’d let the silence go on for long enough. “We sent a force, along with our queen and our crown prince—“ muttering at that but Loki ignored it “—to where we had been told that a threat to Asgard had made its camp. This information came from the highest sources in our army – sources we have trusted for hundreds of years.” He stood, the butt of Gungnir reverberating against the floor as he brought it down.

“Edwik, son of Ari, step forward.”

More murmuring as Edwik, looking confused, stepped forward out of the assembly and knelt, fist over his heart. “Your Majesty,” he began slowly, “If I am under suspicion for treason—“

“Why would I suspect you, Edwik?” Loki asked, a certain chill in his voice. “You but told us that there would be allies of Surtur where there were none – in fact, where there was an elaborate ruse waiting for us. Surely this is not any fault of yours at all.”

“My king…”

“You sent Asgard’s queen and the brother of the king to a place where they may well have come to grievous harm.”
“I meant no—"

“Oh, it was unintentional.” Loki took the stairs down from the dais, one at a time, Gungnir a bright and glittering gold in his hand. “By accident, you sent us into a trap, wasted the time of our officers, and pulled myself and my queen from a task of vital importance to the continued survival of the Nine Realms. Well done.” His tone became slightly sad. “I have held your counsel in high esteem for many centuries, Edwik, and I have been repaid with this. And you ask me still not to accuse you of deliberately misleading us?”

“But my king, you know—and your queen knows—that I but represent the generals,” Edwik replied. He was very calm, Sif thought as she watched her husband pass her, raise Gungnir until its point was inches from Edwik’s chest. But his face was pale, and his eyes were wide. “The information I gave the queen came from the general charged with our scouts.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose, and if it would not have jeopardized everything, Sif might have rolled her eyes. He did enjoy putting on a show far too much, she thought. Betimes it was useful, but this… she felt jittery still, and wished he would simply get to the point.

“So you are but a messenger,” he said, and a moment later—a long moment, in which everyone appeared to be holding their breath—lowered Gungnir. “Knowing our command as I do, I believe you.”

Edwik did not let his breath rush out as the rest of the court did, but she saw his chest deflate a little. Sif felt bad for putting him through this, for among the warriors who had risen through the ranks in the last Great War with Jotunheim, Edwik was their staunchest supporter, but it was necessary.

There was a commotion in the back of the hall, then, shouts and the rattle of armor as two of the guards along the columns of Gladsheim lunged for someone trying to make an escape and dragged him forward through the crowd.

“Vildar,” Loki said, and there was no mistaking the ice in his voice this time. “First son of Olaf. General in our army, and—remind me again, my lady?”

“He commands our scouts,” Sif said. The hall had fallen silent again. “Through him comes all information of the sort that would lead us to believe Surtur had placed a force on our outpost of Ringsfjord.”

“Curious, then, that none of the scouts mentioned in your report on the matter were ever sent.” Loki’s smile could cut metal. Vildar’s eyes were full of hate as he glared at Loki first, then Sif. “Curious too that Surtur’s forces were reported moving to one of the moons of Vanaheim—a moon with no strategic value at all. But I remember telling you something of the place. I can forgive you the mental slip—you were enjoying the wine, after all—though I must admit, you do not seem particularly repentant,” Loki observed. Vildar sneered at him.

“I have no reason to be. Why should I apologize to an unworthy, cowardly argr who never deserved to take the throne, much less hold it?” Vildar looked over at Thor. “The Crown Prince ought to have been brought back the moment the Allfather fell into the Odinsleep.”

“So instead of supporting your legitimate king,” Loki said, “You made a deal with one of Asgard’s worst enemies.”

“Surtur’s destruction would be better than rule by a whelp like you, or your warrior whore—“ Thor gripped Sif’s arm to keep her back but she needed no such precautions, paralyzed with rage.
Loki’s eyes had narrowed to dangerous, bright blue slits, and he brought the tip of Gungnir up to rest over the center of Vildar’s chest.

“Vildar, son of Olaf of Snowfield, you have committed high treason against your king, against the House of Odin, and against the realm of Asgard,” Loki said, raising his voice so that it carried to the very back of Gladsheim. “You have forsworn the oaths you took as a warrior of the realm and you have betrayed the trust placed in you by your kinsman and those of your realm. What say you to these charges?”

Vildar leaned forward in the grip of the guards. “I do not deny them.”

Loki glanced at the guards and they let Vildar go, but drew their swords, keeping a watchful eye. “The punishment for treason is death,” he breathed. “And as king of Asgard and the Nine Realms, it is that to which I sentence you. Let Hela concern herself with your soul, if there is indeed such a thing.”

“You will burn,” Vildar hissed, his hair falling into his wild eyes. “Kill me, but it does not stop with me, Loki Snaketongue. But you would know about vipers in your own house, would you not?”

“I know how to kill them, too.” Loki’s hand did not waver an inch, but he hesitated, looking back over his shoulder at Sif. Their eyes met, and she raised her chin slightly. He turned back to Vildar, the corners of his mouth curling up nastily. “So be it,” he murmured.

A blast of golden light burst from the tip of Gungnir and knocked Vildar back toward the edge of the gathered crowd. They moved back to let him skid to a stop. Loki angled the spear again, and with a sneer, fired off a second blast. Vildar dissolved into thousands of tiny sparks, and all that was left of him faded into darkness.

*

The feast welcoming Thor home was in full swing in one of the halls just off Gladsheim, but when she looked up from correcting Volstagg in the telling of one of their tales of adventure, Sif realized she had not seen Loki for some time. Thor seemed to be fine – he was more attentive to his lady than to the others, and Sif thought that wise, for Jane seemed a bit overwhelmed – and she spotted Darcy, with Haraldr still at her elbow, standing in a knot of young lords and ladies and laughing. Sif smiled a little as she rose from the table; that one would do very well no matter where or how she landed. Loki, though…

She slipped from the feasting hall and down the short passage between the hall and Gladsheim. The hall was empty now; no guards lining the walls, none at the base of the throne, only Loki standing before it, hands clasped behind his back, and when she slipped her hand along his arm, right at the edge of his gardbrace and the fabric underneath, she could all but feel him quivering with tension.

“Am I missed?” he asked.

“As I came looking for you, yes, you were.”

“You know what I mean.”

“As do you.” Sif crossed her arms. “Your brother is home, we have eradicated a conspiracy threatening the heart of our realm, and yet you are here,” she tilted her head toward the throne, “Sulking.”

“I am not sulking.”
“Moping, then.”

Loki shot her a glare. “Did Mother send you to bring me back? Tell her I shall be along when I am through moping.”

“I came,” Sif told him, raising her voice slightly, “Because you sneaked off in the middle of a feast to come stare at the throne as though you were never to sit upon it again.”

“You said it. Thor is back, he has fulfilled what our father asked of him, he has been found worthy again. He will be asked to take the throne.”

“Have you thought to ask what your brother wants?”

“It does not matter what he wants. The line of succession is restored. Thor may say that he does not want the throne, that he will leave me to continue to rule, but…”

He let his gaze drop to the floor, and Sif pressed her lips together. “Sometimes, Loki,” she told him, exasperation creeping into her tone, “You think overmuch on things.” Reaching up she laid a hand on his cheek, made him look at her so she knew he was paying attention. “Things to which you ought to trust. Thor says that he does not want to take the throne – Loki, your brother could not lie his way out of a sack of grain, there is no reason to think he will be anything but adamant in this. You have lost nothing.” Her hand slipped around the back of his neck, under the metal of his collar into the curls of hair at his nape. “You will lose no one.”

“Sif…” Loki twisted so they were facing each other, and for a moment he looked very – lost, was a good word. Lost, afraid, though of what she could not tell. “Do you swear it?”

“Of course I swear it,” she replied. “I swore it on our wedding day, and I swear it now. Would you have me swear it again?”

“No.” He leaned down the rest of the way to kiss her, and Sif tightened her fingers on his neck, her other hand resting on the gold adornment on his chest. Peppermint and mead and magic, familiar but never tiresome. When they pulled apart it wasn’t very far, and Loki’s voice hummed low and heavy in her ears.

“I trust you,” he said, and she kissed him again for it, knowing that it was one of the things closest to his heart. Some could doubt that Loki even had one, but Sif felt it under her palm, beating strong and fast. She knew better.

This time she was breathing harder when their lips parted, but could feel herself smirking enough to rival one of Loki’s. He raised an eyebrow, following when she took his hand and pulled him up toward the dais.

“I thought you wanted me back at the feast?”

“They can all wait.” Sif looked back over her shoulder. “Do you know that I have never sat upon the throne?” Her smirk widened into a wolfish grin when she saw he understood.

“Oh, my lady,” he said, and Sif bit her lip as she watched his eyes darken. “I do believe we shall have to remedy that.”
The feast was still going when Thor and Jane had risen from the table and bid everyone still there a
good night; from where she leaned against the balcony wall Jane could hear it faintly, laughter and
shouting. Her eyes were back on the stars though, brighter than ever among the nebulae that scrolled
across the sky. Everything here was bright; Jane’s eyes ached from trying to take in all the colors and
the lights, and her head ached from the mead she’d sipped at dinner until she’d decided that a drink
made by people who were basically gods was probably a bit too strong for her.

She could hear Thor rattling around behind her, stripping off his armor and getting ready for bed, but
Jane felt her mind was too busy whirling around to ever quiet enough for sleep. Asgard – an alien
realm – it was exactly as Thor had described it, and yet it was completely different than anything
she’d expected. The stars were comforting, though. Things in space were the same, no matter what
realm she was in. The people were the ones who changed.

Jane had gotten the sense that she was something of a curiosity among the court – the mortal who
studied the stars and had the favor of their royalty. When she’d come in to dinner holding Thor’s
hand, the curiosity had begun to change to something else. But that was something she could deal
with. She didn’t know how to handle being looked at like some new exhibit in a zoo.

“Jane?”

Thor had dressed for bed, loose pants and a shirt left open to the pleasant night air. Jane had no robe
on over the shift she’d been given to wear, but she wasn’t cold, and when she turned and wrapped
her arms around Thor’s waist she sighed at the heat of his body.

“I was just looking to see if there were any constellations I could recognize,” she said. “There should
be a couple, based on where Asgard is in space, but I think that the palace or one of the nebulae
blocks them, because this place doesn’t exactly have hemispheres—“ She stopped when Thor put
one of his fingers against her lips, and only removed it when she gave him a rueful smile. “Sorry. It’s
just been a… a really long day.”

“It has been. Jane, does something here trouble you?”

“No – no, Thor,” she said. “Your home – it’s wonderful, and amazing, and it’s what we’ve been
searching for and it’ll completely change things on Earth. I just… I’m a human, and I’ve been stared
at and questioned and all but opened up and probed all day. I don’t know how Darcy’s escaped it.”

Thor smiled. “She is not the lover of their prince,” he replied.

“So I’m only being examined because I’m with you?”

“Many of the greater houses have had designs upon me since before my birth.” Thor made a face.
“They have no daughters that compare to you, and if they discount the people of Midgard it is their
own folly. I was as arrogant as they, when I came to your realm. I know better now.”

He took her by the hands and led her back inside to the huge, fur-covered bed, and she snuggled into
it and watched as he draped the shirt over the back of a chair and slid in beside her. There were a few
moments of adjusting, tangling their legs together and arranging pillows and bodies, but they finally
got comfortable. The warmth, and the lingering effects of the mead, made Jane drowsy.

“We will return to Midgard tomorrow,” Thor rumbled beside her. “Now that the threat is off my
home for the moment, we must see to the defense of yours.”

“Asgard really is amazing,” Jane mumbled against his chest, and when Thor spoke again she could
hear the smile in his voice.
“I knew you would love it,” he said, voice growing dimmer as she edged toward sleep. “And Asgard will love you too, Jane. As much as I do.”

*  

Breakfast was a quiet affair taken in Frigga’s hall of Fensalir. Darcy stared bleary-eyed into her food until Frigga patted her on the arm and handed her a cup full of something to take the edge off the hangover. Having had their mother’s remedy for overindulgence before, Loki and Thor both winced in sympathy as she downed it in one gulp as instructed and nearly spat it back out.

“What is that?” she asked, then paused, fingers going to her forehead. “Never mind, I probably don’t want to know what’s in it, but it worked. Thank you, uh—“

“Just call me Frigga, dear.”

After breakfast everyone filtered slowly down to their horses. Darcy grinned at Haraldr as he kissed her knuckles and bid her goodbye, looking mournfully after her until he caught Sif’s amused gaze and straightened, and was as still as any guard in the palace as they trotted out of the courtyard and turned toward the Observatory.

As Heimdall took his place on the pedestal and the machinery below their feet began to spin up, Jane reached over for Thor’s hand. When he gave her a quizzical look, she smiled.

“So I don’t go flying off into space,” she said.

Then Heimdall lowered his sword and the Bifrost pulled them along its length, and a few moments (or an eternity) later, their boots hit the red desert ground of New Mexico once more.

“You’d think after how we left, Coulson would have just posted people out here to wait for us,” Jane said. “Where is everyone?”

“I think,” Loki said slowly, “That may answer your question, Dr. Foster.” Jane followed his gaze – and Sif’s, and Darcy’s, and Thor’s as each of them turned around – and stared, horror-struck, at what lay before them.

Where the buildings had been there were now only piles of smoking rubble, girders twisted and sticking up into the air like broken bones.

The base had been completely destroyed.
Morphogenesis

Chapter Notes

Once again I must give at least 12% credit to the beta process, without which this chapter would have been of much lesser quality.

*morphogenesis*: the biological process that causes an organism to develop its shape. It is one of three fundamental aspects of developmental biology along with the control of cell growth and cellular differentiation.

Jane stared down into the pile of rubble that had been the research and development building on the base and felt sick.

“My work,” she whimpered.

At the edge of one of the piles of rubble, Loki knelt in the dust and dug his fingertips into it. The ground always absorbed magic to a certain degree, though there were other materials that were better for it. He could tell with a reasonable amount of certainty what had happened here (though he didn’t need any spells for *that*) and more importantly, what still *was* here.

“The Tesseract is gone,” he said, and watched as four faces suddenly drained of color. “I cannot tell if its power was used here or not, but it is no longer within a hundred leagues of this place.”

“We were not gone a day.” Thor dropped Mjolnir to the ground and ran his hands through his hair, over his face. “How could this have happened so quickly?”

Darcy had her arm around Jane’s shoulders and was talking quietly to her; Loki caught the phrase *can’t leave them alone for a minute* and pressed his lips together. It had been an error on his part, leaving this place undefended while running back off to Asgard without the cube in hand. It mattered little, now; the Tesseract was who knew where, and the blame was at least in part upon him.

“Do you believe Surtur has it?” Thor asked. Loki shrugged, and straightened up, brushing off his hand.

“Perhaps. The fact that there is still a Midgard to come to bodes well; whatever happened here happened hours ago, by my estimation, and Surtur would not have waited so long if he had his prize in hand.”

“SIFIELD took it, then,” Sif said. “Or else Surtur wants something else before he begins his assault.”

“He does not.” Loki had seen into the demon’s mind – not much, but enough to be certain of that. Surtur would not have hesitated when he meant to strike swiftly and wipe out all those who opposed him.

Sif’s brow crinkled. “How can you be so sure?”

“Hey, guys?” Darcy pointed up. “We’re about to have company.”

A whine filled the air, and they all looked up as a shadow passed over them, resolving into a strange-
looking contraption - one of SHIELD’s quinjets, Loki remembered reading about them one night – that landed not far off. The back hatch dropped and two agents walked briskly out of the back of the jet, their jackets flapping in the wind kicked up by the jet’s rotors as they approached. Everyone clustered around to hear over the noise.

“Director Fury thought you might be returning here soon,” the bald-pated one with glasses said. “I’m Agent Jasper Sitwell, this is Agent Emily Anokhin. We were assigned to wait for you.”

“What has happened to the Tesseract?” Sif demanded, edging forward, and Loki readied himself to take her arm if she began to get violent. To her credit Agent Anokhin didn’t back down, but she did go a little pale around the edges.

“Agent Coulson requested we keep discussion to a minimum until we’re in flight,” she said. “He’s prepared briefing packets for all of you to read while we’re en route. They’ll explain what happened better than either of us could, and we were here when it happened.”

Everyone exchanged worried looks, but followed Sitwell and Anokhin up the ramp and into the relatively quieter back of the quinjet; once the ramp rose into place it was quieter still, the engines a faint whine to either side.

Sitwell went forward to tell the pilots that they were aboard. “Take a seat, please,” Anokhin said. There was a moment of confusion – Sif lowered herself into one of the seats gingerly, as though it would buck her off like a wild horse, and Loki was only a little better – but they caught on to how to work the straps to buckle themselves in quickly enough and settled in as the jet rose up into the sky. Sif craned her head to look out through the front windows, watching as they sped over the dry mountains west of the base and headed out over the desert, completely enthralled. Loki affected disinterest, but Thor caught his eyes straying forward too, a very familiar expression of interest in them.

Once they were level, Anokhin distributed tablets to each of them. “Nine hours ago – about one in the morning – detection software registered an atmospheric event. We could not classify it as a Foster-type event— Jane tried and failed to keep a smug expression off her face at that “—and put the base on high alert in response to a potential threat.”

As she spoke, data and wire-frame renderings of the event appeared in little callouts around the edges of the tablets, then the center began to fill with video recordings of the events that followed. “The event reached peak three minutes after it was detected and one minute after that, our sensors – calibrated for extraterrestrial biological signs – alerted us to an incoming force. The base scrambled security teams and transport for residents, as well as putting out a general call for air support, although our main mobile base was too far away to provide much. Most who couldn’t get direct transport made it to Albuquerque International and are slowly being put on flights there and sent to other bases, but…” her face fell just a bit, the professionalism slipping and allowing some of the exhaustion and emotional impact out. “There was a significant loss of life.”

“Why didn’t you ask for support from Kirtland?” Jane asked curiously. “I’ve had to call them up and tell them whatever they’ve got flying around overhead is messing with my readings. I know they’ve got the capacity for giving you guys support, and I’d think they’d want to.”

“SHIELD and the United States Military have a… complex relationship,” Sitwell replied. “In general we try to stay out of each other’s way, but they don’t appreciate what they think of as interference from us, and SHIELD needs autonomy from the military to be able to carry out its operations. We’ve got mutual aid agreements, sure, but more often than not unless it’s world-shattering, they’re not invoked. Probably for the better.”
Loki’s eyebrows had twitched upward, though he was watching something on his tablet. “One would think that working at cross-purposes weakens both of you.”

Anokhin smiled a little; she seemed to have regained her composure. “Oh, SHIELD is always quick to lend a hand whenever the military asks. We like to honor our agreements.”

“It was over quickly, anyway,” Sitwell continued. “We’d have appreciated air support, but the ground was a mess as it was without hotshot pilots flying around shooting at everything that looked at them sideways.”

“And the Tesseract?”

“Airlifted to our mobile base, which is where we’re heading now.” Anokhin checked her own tablet. “Estimated flight time is an hour and thirty minutes. They’re just south of the Channel Islands, off the coast of California.”

“I dislike repeating myself, but Director Fury does realize that keeping the Tesseract moving will not keep it from attracting Surtur’s forces, I hope,” Loki said.

Sitwell spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “I think that’s something they want to talk to you about. Better settle in, though.”

Anokhin went forward with Sitwell, and one by one, most of the five of them set their tablets aside and got as comfortable as they could. Darcy was asleep almost immediately – hangover remedies didn’t necessarily cure late nights – and after a while, Thor put his tablet on the seat beside him and leaned against Jane, dozing off. Jane had switched over to going through their work and ensuring it was all there and in place.

“Look,” she said, and flicked her fingers over a window; it skidded across to Loki’s screen and he tapped it, making it enlarge so he could clearly see the schematic. “Tony’s got a prototype.”

“The man works quickly.” Loki tracked his finger over the design, moving it around on the tablet so he could see it. “I admit I did not expect him to have anything done, the way he carries on.”

Jane snorted. “He annoyed me at first, too,” she said. “Even though I appreciated his help, working with him was damn near impossible. But he’s brilliant. It’s worth putting up with the constant posturing.”

“I have had enough of that from warriors at home,” Loki said, but lapsed into a thoughtful silence after that, only half paying attention to what he was doing on the tablet. Sif had fallen asleep not long ago, her shoulder and thigh pressed against him and her hair falling into her face. She had always had the knack of falling asleep whenever she got the chance. Loki’s mind was too busy for that, going back to the thread he’d been following since Vildar’s execution, laying out the pieces and putting everything into place.

Jane watched him think in silence for a while, glancing up over the top of her tablet every so often. Finally she thumbed it off and reached round to put it behind her. “You’re thinking again.”

“I have a tendency.”

“They aren’t happy thoughts. Your face always goes blank then.” She just set her jaw when he gave her a look. “Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“You are far too perceptive for your own good,” Loki muttered, but shifted. Beside him, Sif stirred, and both Loki and Jane were quiet until she’d resettled herself and dropped back into a deeper sleep.
“I have to be,” Jane said. “Otherwise I’d get nowhere.” She raised an eyebrow. “Does that surprise you or something?”

“Not as much as it would have five days ago.” He set his tablet aside at last, the display dimming when his hands left contact with it. “You are remarkable even among those whom some call gods, Jane Foster.”

“Taking that as a compliment,” Jane said, but there was a smile playing about the corners of her mouth. “So. You’re thinking, and they’re not good thoughts. That doesn’t exactly bode well for the rest of us mere mortals.”

Loki took a moment to phrase his thoughts. “You have all been thrust into the spotlight of a stage that is suddenly much larger than you ever thought,” he said at last. “The realms are full of foes you cannot hope to match. Thinking of how to extricate all of us from this situation isn’t exactly pleasant.”

“We’re not helpless,” Jane replied. “We might not know as much about what we’re up against, we might not be damn near indestructible, but we’re not going to let our world go without a fight. We have heroes too.” She fixed him with a very level stare. “Don’t count us out before you’ve seen what we can do.”

“I would not be so foolish.”

Jane smiled at him, and Loki could not miss the edge in it, or the pride in her home that she had. “I know you wouldn’t, Loki.”

They both fell quiet after that, Jane eventually drifting off to sleep with her head tucked under Thor’s chin. Loki could not bring himself to do the same; his mind whirled, and as glad as he was that he’d been able to sidestep part of Jane’s questioning (and her reassurances on the hidden strength of mortals were far more convincing than Fury’s were, if Loki was honest with himself), it brought him no comfort. She would find out when it happened, and despite the unusual circumstances they had met under and for all that Jane was a mortal, he had not lied when he’d told her she was remarkable.

Loki leaned his head back against the edge of the seat. He was going to do what others did not have the will to do, he told himself. If he did not, nobody would, and everyone would pay the price.

*  
The ocean flashed blue underneath them, the sun reflecting off the water visible between fingers of fog and into the cockpit of the quinjet as they dropped down from cruising altitude. Sif had woken up not long after they had crossed into California and had joined Loki in leaning against the bulkhead, watching the city slide below them and turn into a curving strip of beach that flashed by under them. Fifteen minutes ago that had slid from view into the ocean, and save for some craggy islands rising up to either side and the white trails left by ships, there was no more land to be seen.

“Five minutes out, Agents,” one of the pilots said. “We’re holding for about a minute while the arrival ahead of us lands.” Sitwell and Anokhin acknowledged it and went back to working urgently on their tablets, speaking in soft voices. The pilot tilted her head back and grinned at Sif and Loki.

“We’re going to circle the ‘carrier,’” she said. “It’ll give you a chance to see where we’re going.”

“We do know what ships are,” Sif replied. Loki noticed she had slipped her shield onto her arm and reflexively gripped the hilt of her glaive every so often.

“We have even been on them,” Loki added, in a tone that made the edges of Sif’s mouth twitch.
“Ones far more grand than anything Midgard can produce, I’m certain.”

“You’ve never been on a ship like this. Just trust me, you won’t wanna miss it, Your Majesties.”

Sif and Loki shared a look, but the ship that finally came into view as they broke free of the fog bank surrounding the coast was, they had to admit, very impressive. Grey and imposing, it sat low in the water as the waves lapped at its sides. Their quinjet banked to allow another one by on its own flight path, making a lazy circle around the vessel while they waited their turn and allowing everyone – for the other three were now awake and pressed forward to watch, too – a chance to take in the sight. There were two deck levels both with more quinjets and smaller aircraft on them, and crates that people seemed to be covering with webbed straps.

The radio crackled to tell them that they had landing clearance and the pilot took them in, landing them neatly on the yellow SHIELD logo with only a slight bump. She lowered the tramp immediately, letting in bright sunlight and a salt-laden breeze, and turned. “Last stop, everyone off.”

Agent Anokhin led the group of them across the deck to where the passengers from the other quinjet were standing. One was a slim, straight-backed woman with vibrant red hair and a cool gaze; the other, a rumpled, scruffy-looking man. Both of them looked up, taking in Sif, Loki and Thor – the woman merely raised an eyebrow, but the man seemed to become even more flustered than he already was.

“Agent Natasha Romanoff,” the woman said, extending a hand out to each of them in turn. The man stepped forward after a moment, making his own rounds and wincing a bit after Thor let go of his hand.

“Doctor Bruce Banner.” He peered round at them. “So uh, you’re the people from another planet.”

Sif eyed him warily; there had been a dossier on Bruce in the material they’d been given on their tablets. Not all of it had spoken well of the doctor’s command on his other half. “Realm.”

“Yeah. Yeah, realm.”

Jane pushed her way between Thor and Loki; she looked a little queasy, but her manner was all professional. “Dr. Banner,” she said, breathless. “The Dr. Banner?”

“I’m the only one, yes…”

“Amazing! I saw your file on the tablets they gave us on the flight out here and guessed we’d be working together!” Jane brightened. “This is great! I’ve been meaning to ask you about your paper on anti-proton—“ she cut off when the breeze gusted hard, gulped for air, then ran for the edge of the ship. Thor teetered for a moment and then followed her, a look of concern on his face.

“She said the smell of the ocean was making her a little sick. I doubt being on a boat helps,” Darcy supplied. “She’ll be fine when she gets inside, Dr. Banner.”

“I was told I’d be working with her,” Bruce said. He was quiet, but there was something tense about him, like something held in check just below the surface. “As well as Tony Stark, and… Loki, right?”

“I suppose we can forego the formalities.”

“Okay…” They fell into an awkward silence. Loki was eyeing Bruce with far too much curiosity for Sif’s comfort, and Natasha was watching all of them with a trained eye. Her gaze lit on Sif’s shield and collapsed glaive, and Sif marked how a spark of interest flared up for a moment before being
carefully put back down as she turned away to speak quietly into her earpiece.

“So, uh… this must all be really weird for you.” Bruce made a gesture encompassing the deck. “Or at least really different.”

“Different, yes,” Sif replied, looking around the deck. “Midgard is full of things that are both strange and familiar all at once. Ships are one of them.” She paused as a loud clank sounded from somewhere nearby and the deck vibrated under their feet. “More or less.”

Shouts rang out across the deck as a claxon began to sound, and the four of them looked up at where lights at the corners of the tower aft of them were flashing. Natasha turned back to the group, the barest hint of a smile about her mouth.

“If you want strange, you’re about to get it,” she said. “We’ll have to go inside in a few minutes. Better go collect Dr. Foster and Thor.”

“Why?”

“It gets difficult to breathe above a certain altitude.”

Bruce looked thoughtful, suddenly, but Darcy furrowed her brow as they walked between aircraft on the deck to get to where Thor had his arm around Jane’s waist and they were staring out at the water. “Are we going on another flight?” she asked.

They reached the edge right as a high-pitched whine filled the air, coupled with the sound of rushing water. “I don’t think you’re wrong,” Bruce replied.

The deck rumbled again as a giant turbine rose up out of the ocean before them, churning the water into froth and kicking up a spray that made Sif’s lips taste of salt. She was too enthralled to lick it away, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see that even Loki’s eyes had gone huge, his lips slightly parted. If she had not been caught herself, Sif would have smiled. There were not many things in the realms that could render Loki speechless.

The wind kicked up by the turbine as it rose from the sea and locked into place whipped their clothes against their bodies, and after Thor’s cape billowed into Darcy’s face and they had begun to rise out of the water, Natasha gestured them after her. The deck crew they passed all had on clear-faced masks to help them breathe in the air, and when they had stepped inside into an industrial gray corridor, the hatch behind them shut with the hiss of pressurized air.

“Director Fury wants all of you on the Command Deck,” Natasha said. “Follow me.”

The inside of the ship was as brightly lit as the base had been, but they were too preoccupied with the way the floor pressed against their feet as they walked, indicating that they were still rising. There were glassed-in labs everywhere, and Banner and Jane dropped back to speak quietly, exclaiming softly over pieces of equipment that had some significance to them. Though he could feel the invasive prickle of the Tesseract’s power – it was close by somewhere, although he didn’t see it in any of the rooms they passed – Loki paid it no mind, and when they came to the Command Deck it was relegated temporarily to the back end of his thoughts.

No bright overhead lights; no close corridors. They passed through a set of doors and into a wide space. Past a table with seven chairs around it and a slightly lower dais where Fury stood before two banks of displays, a sloping ramp led down to the broad windows before them. Loki passed them all by and went there, looking down between his feet as they rose higher into the air. Sif stayed behind, her hands grasping the rail separating Fury’s dais from the level of the table. It vibrated slightly but it
helped keep her steady as the water dropped away and, quickly, so did the clouds.

Around the room, men and women sat at monitors watching displays shift and change, and calling out status reports.

“All four engines green.”

“Power plant output is green.”

“Communications check.”

“Altitude check – one-eight-four-three-four feet and climbing.”

“All applicable SHIELD Emergency Protocols in effect,” a woman just below Fury’s command station called up to him. “We’re level, Director.”

“Good.” Fury leaned on his own displays, watching the skies ahead. “Take us up.” There was a low rumble beneath their feet as the ship began to rise even faster.

“Engaging retro-reflectors.”

“Engaged. Deploying escorts.”

The woman tapped a few more boxes on her displays, read the contents, and turned to Fury. “Green across the board.”

“Congratulations, Director,” he said quietly as he passed Fury. “You have managed to impress me.”

“Always happy to oblige a guest,” Fury replied after shooting a look at Loki’s back. “Welcome to SHIELD’s Helicarrier, ladies and gentlemen. This is our mobile base of operations, and until we reach one of our more secure headquarters it will be where the Tesseract is housed. I assume you’ve all been filled in on what happened at our Albuquerque facility last night?”

“Your briefing packet wasn’t exactly comprehensive,” Bruce said. He’d taken up a position close to the door, leaning on the back of one of the chairs. He looked edgy. “You’ve got an alien and an astrophysicist, what do you need me for?”

“The Tesseract emits gamma radiation; there’s a project underway to come up with some kind of device to sense this kind of thing and we need your expertise.”

There was something in Bruce’s eyes as he leaned forward a bit more. “You don’t want… the other guy?”

Loki marked the way every pair of eyes around the table glanced at Bruce, suddenly apprehensive. Interesting, he thought. They all fear the monster he keeps inside him, but he has no fear of it himself. It was a sentiment he found he envied.

“Just your mind.”

Loki was still watching Fury when Tony emerged from one of the side corridors; he appeared to have stopped making concessions to setting entirely, wearing a shirt pushed to the elbows, the light of his ARC reactor glowing through the layers. “Yeah, Director Fury really knows how to sweet-talk the boys.” He made a jaunty little wave in the direction of the Asgardians. “Sparky, Sneaky, Sexy, nice to have you and Miss Smarty-pants back. And you—” he pointed at Bruce as he walked over—“must be Dr. Bruce Banner – pioneer in the study of gamma radiation, physicist, charity doctor,
and jolly green giant.”

Bruce gave Tony a look that plainly said he wasn’t sure whether to laugh, shake Tony’s offered hand, or edge away. He settled for shaking hands and not making eye contact. “Nice to meet you too,” he said.

Tony was already moving around the table, clearly gearing up for something grand. “Great news, everyone! I’ve got a new toy to show you.”

“We saw, it was in our briefing packets,” Jane said. Tony stopped and gave Fury a wounded look.

“You ruined my surprise, Fury?”

“Necessary information.” The Director pressed his palms to the table, fixing Loki with a one-eyed stare. “I know you have your concerns about the Tesseract’s security—”

“Which you have steadfastly refused to heed,” Loki interjected. “As now you only present a moving target to Surtur, rather than a stationary one.”

“It’s all in Fury’s ledger,” Tony added, throwing himself into a chair and letting it roll a few inches across the deck. “Check the acceptable losses column.”

Even Sif raised an eyebrow at that, and Loki leaned forward, interested. Whatever had happened in the day they had been gone, it was enough for the tensions between Tony and Fury to escalate even further.

“I do not calculate the lives of SHIELD employees as acceptable losses,” Fury said icily. “What we know is what you know at this point; the event that brought the attackers in came down right on top of the base. We were damn lucky to get the Tesseract out, much less have as few casualties as we did, and I am not going to question luck when it comes my way.”

Loki’s voice was smooth, his fingers tracing some strange pattern on the table. “I admit surprise that a man such as yourself believes in something as uncontrollable as luck, Director.”

“I believe in it. I just also believe in insurance.” Fury took a breath. “The Tesseract is in a secure lab next to the workroom given to Drs. Foster and Banner, Stark, and yourself. I’ll escort all of you there myself so you can see our arrangement. It’s not as ideal as the facility in Albuquerque, but it meets our needs.”

After another brief staring contest, Loki went back to tracing his fingers across the table. “I suppose I will content myself with that for now.”

“Agent Romanoff, if you could…?”

Natasha stood, all fluid grace. “The tour, sir?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Of course. This way please, Your Majesty, Thor.”

Thor rose but leaned over Jane for a moment, speaking quietly with her; when she had reassured him she would be all right, he straightened and followed Sif and Natasha out of the room. Everyone else turned to look at Fury.

“Follow me,” he said. In the scuffle of chairs moving and people rising, nobody noticed Loki’s wrist
and fingers flick rapidly for a moment before he, too, joined the group heading down to the research levels.

The lab housing the Tesseract was in the heart of the Helicarrier; save for into the various labs and workrooms along the way, there were no windows. One set opened out into a cavernous room with a flat, cylindrical glass room in it, a sight that seemed to unsettle Bruce; he paused in his conversation with Jane and Tony and eyed it as they walked by, something strange flickering across his face, something dark. Loki made note of it.

“This is where you’ll be working, gentleman – and lady,” Fury added, nodding to Jane. “All your data was backed up onto our main servers before the attack, so you’ve lost nothing—“

“Except my equipment,” Jane muttered.

“We’ll replace it.” Fury sounded a little stiff, but he tapped a few buttons on one of the displays and every screen in the lab came to life, and on one wall, a security keypad lit up as well. Fury walked over to it and one by one they programmed their retinal scans and thumbprints into it. The door slid open, and Loki tensed as the Tesseract’s power, undimmed by anything in between, washed over him. He did not quail away, though, standing firm. It would not master him.

“This room is completely shielded,” Fury was saying. “No gamma radiation leaks out when the door’s shut, and even when it’s not the amount is negligible, since we’ve shielded the outer lab as well. The only people who have access to it are the four of you, Agents Coulson and Hill, and myself. The cube is otherwise completely secure.”

He was looking directly at Loki when he spoke, and Loki kept his face impassive. Fury might think his arrangements sufficient, but if Loki had been able to feel the Tesseract’s cold fingers digging into him from elsewhere on the ship, then Surtur and his cohorts would be able to as well. But they were rapidly approaching a point where that would no longer matter.

When Fury finally left, Tony walked over to a countertop and, with a flourish, pulled a plastic sheet off a device about the size of the tablets they’d had on the flight in. “Gentlemen, Jane,” he said, “This is what I’ve got. Let’s make it better.”

*  

Thor had peeled away some time ago after growing bored, but Sif felt as though she and Natasha had walked the length and breadth of the helicarrier at least thrice, up sets of stairs and down long corridors so that the majesty of the ship was beginning to wear off.

“So. I’m sure this is the point where I ask if you’re suitably impressed,” Natasha asked as they walked along a glassed-in observation area, above the two decks. Off to either side of the ship she could see two smaller planes, like outriders to an army.

“It is very… large,” Sif said. “Though truly, I am surprised that humans could come up with such a thing.”

Natasha’s mouth quirked up a little bit. “I can’t say your reaction surprises me.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve read the mythology – it’s full of… I don’t know. Things that seem impossible to us – rings that produce more rings, hammers that control lightning, giants and monsters and magic and eight-legged horses—“
“Sleipnir is quite real.” That made Natasha look over, one brow arched in a question she didn’t need to put into words. Sif laughed. “Loki did not birth him, as in your myths. He was a gift to the Allfather from one of the allied realms, long before any of us were even born.”

“Well, good to know at least some of the myths are true.”

“Some of them.” Sif felt the weight of her shield and glaive at her back, and thought of what she had read of her own story, as the mortals would have it. Once she would have scoffed, perhaps, at the idea that she could ever be seen as a goddess docile enough to be represented by wheat; now things were different. Still… “On others, I must commend your storytellers for their skill, but we have definitely written our own tales.”

Something passed across Natasha’s face at that, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. She was like Loki, maddeningly layered.

“You mean like the part where you became a warrior?”

Sif smiled after a moment, and nodded. “I certainly wrote my own tale in that choice, yes, and threw the threads of others’ weaving all into disarray. But I was never one to simply let things fall out as others planned them for me. If I had…” she fell quiet a moment, thinking on it – her mother had planned great things for Sif, namely that her hand would have been placed in Thor’s palm instead of Loki’s. Thinking of how close that had come to being made reality made her more irate now that she had seen how happy her friend – her brother – was with Jane. “…things would have been quite different.”

Natasha seemed to study her out of the corner of an eye for a moment. “That’s a very human sentiment.”

“I may be Asgardian and you may be mortal, but there are things we share.” Sif gave Natasha a sidelong glance of her own. “Such as, perhaps, an appreciation for weaponry.”

To her credit, the only reaction Natasha had was another slight quirk of her mouth. “So you did see.”

“It was not the look most other mortals I have encountered give my shield and glaive. You were appraising them as one knowledgeable about their use might.”

“I’ll admit my preference is for more modern weaponry, but I’ve done my time with a sword.”

“Have you? That puts you far ahead of most others I have met here.”

“It’s important to be prepared.” Natasha’s lips curved up a little more. “Though, I have to say I’m a little out of practice.”

Sif gave the redhead a very wolfish grin. “I believe,” she said, “That I might be able to help with that.”

* 

“So,” Tony said.

Everyone looked up from what they were working on. Jane had been filling Bruce in on what they’d done so far, giving him the background (she’d sniffed at what they’d given him in his briefing packet and said it was about as comprehensive as the first week of an introductory college physics class). Loki glanced up at Tony through the transparent display he was working at, then went back to toying with a complicated line of runes. There was a simpler, more elegant way to work it, he knew,
but it was maddeningly out of reach.

“Is no one going to talk about how Fury never once talked about why he let a multibillion-dollar base get torched? Nobody?”

“He said the event happened right above the base,” Bruce replied. “I’m the first to admit I don’t know much about SHIELD and its ability to respond, but I’d imagine that gives them a really small window of time.”

“SHIELD is capable of responding as quickly as it needs to,” Jane muttered.

“Which is what makes it damn strange that they just let their spread be completely leveled – especially one where they had a huge research establishment. And not just our stuff, either. SHIELD isn’t going to put its all-powerful cosmic cubes in one basket. They didn’t pull that thing in there from the ocean just so we could spin it around in virtual space and make magical dowsing rods with it.”

“It’s a power source,” Jane replied, though her brow had furrowed. “We were going to use it to make a connection between Asgard and Earth, though that was before…” she looked over at Loki.

“That point is moot now,” Loki agreed. He finished sliding bars to calibrate the instrumentation for a test and pushed the screen out of his way. “The Tesseract is a liability, whatever Fury says.”

“It is a power source,” Bruce repeated thoughtfully. “So it can be used for any number of things.”

“Foster over there nailed it – speaking of, you look pretty good, Doctor, brought a little of that cosmic radiation glow back with you from space I see – it’s a zero-point energy source, Banner. It’s the energy discovery of the century, and it’s sitting in a glass cylinder on a flying fortress.”

“It lends prestige and power of another sort.” Loki crossed his arms. “The one controlling the cube – or possessing it – is the power in the realms. An attractive prospect, for the kind of man I suspect Fury is.”

“You shouldn’t be so suspicious.”

They all turned to look at the speaker, a tall blond man in a plaid shirt and khakis, who introduced himself to Loki as “Steve Rogers, Your Majesty. Better known as Captain America.” He held out a hand, and Loki stared at it until he dropped it.

Tony seemed to be less than impressed. “Captain,” he said, “We’re only following Fury’s example. The man doesn’t trust his own shadow, so why should we trust him?”

“It’s not like we have any way to figure out what he’s really up to,” Bruce said.

“Now, wait just a minute,” Steve cut in. “You’re talking about spying on a superior…”

“It’d be spying on a spy.” Tony pushed his own screen out of the way and leaned on his knees. “Fury’s not on the level with us, but he expects us to level with him. I don’t like it.”

“It’s not like one of us can follow him,” Jane said, prodding idly at one of the lines of theory before her.

“We do not have to.” When they all looked over at him, Loki shrugged. “Fury has no hold on me, and he is certainly not my superior in any sense of the word, so I felt no reason not to weave an eavesdropping spell.”
“They have those?”

“I have an extremely large repertoire of similar spells,” Loki smiled thinly, going back to his work. “They are simple, effective, and very useful in the court. All that I must do is link the threads of that spell to one that will allow me to listen from anywhere I wish.”

“Don’t look so uncomfortable, Rogers,” Tony said, and there was very little of his usual flip tone in his voice. “Now that we’ve pointed it out, you can’t help but see it too. You’re the one who lost a lot to the Tesseract, the way Dad talked about it. Don’t tell me that you want to see it back in play.”

They were all quiet, staring at Steve as conflicting emotions, one after the next, flickered across his face. “Director Fury and SHIELD have my loyalty,” he said at last, though there was the sense of more unsaid behind those words, a kind of bleakness that spoke of the deep chill of winter. “I owe them.”

“You don’t owe them ignorance,” Tony yelled after Steve as he left. They were all silent after that. Jane looked faraway, lost in thought. Tony looked irritated. Bruce looked uncomfortable.

“Whatever,” Tony muttered, angrily jamming a tool into the strewn innards of what he was today calling the Anomaly Detector 2.0. “The man’s a fossil. Out of his time. We don’t need people like him anymore.”

Everyone bent their heads and got back to work, but Loki watched Tony through the screen as he pulled it back in front of him and watched the computer run simulations. Fractious and unstable, he thought to himself, and let his thoughts spin out like the numbers in their equations.

*

They all gathered in what looked like a conference room for a group dinner. Thor and Darcy were already there, talking quietly about the court, and Steve came in a few minutes after the lab group did, seating himself beside Darcy; Sif and Natasha arrived last, covered in sweat (and bruises, Loki could see several blossoming on the backs of Sif’s arms) and looking extremely pleased with themselves.

“I don’t know that it’s good for you to let them be friends,” Tony said, filling his plate from the steaming trays along the center of the table. “Romanoff’s a real-life Bond girl.” When he was met with blank stares by more than person around the table, he rolled his eyes. “She’ll teach Sif more ways to be deadly and look damn good doing it.”

“As I decide who my friends are and my dear husband does not, I am certain that he will do the wise thing and choose to ignore you, Tony Stark,” Sif replied. Plates had been specially laid for the Asgardians at the table, and Sif was tucking into hers with alacrity. “He is not incorrect, though. Natasha is skilled in the art of battle, after her own fashion, and I can learn much from her.”

“I fear you may have a point, Stark.” Loki left it at that though, and Sif and Natasha turned to comparison of bladed weapons and hand-to-hand fighting styles within minutes.

Coulson found them as they were finishing up and handed Loki and Sif ID badges, bearing their pictures, names, and clearance levels. “These will get you into anywhere you need to be,” he said. “Make sure you wear them at all times…” There was a pause as all three of them looked down at their garb, a mix of leather and fabric and metal. “Just, you know, somewhere,” Coulson finished, nonplussed. “It would be awkward if you went without them, though everyone on the Helicarrier knows who you are.”
That night Loki watched the play of light on the tiny circuits in the badge as the Helicarrier’s escort planes made their regular loops. White and green and red, backlighting his face and Sif’s as they passed, marking the time of his thoughts.

Bright yellow spilled across them, ruining the effect until Sif turned off the bathroom light and came to bed. She had showered and though he shivered as her wet hair made contact with his skin, the rest of her was warm, and Loki closed his eyes, savoring the feel of his wife’s skin against his own. The future – their future – was uncertain to him now, and simple things like this were things he wished to enjoy as long as he could.

“Coulson has said we are crossing the country,” Sif murmured once she’d gotten settled in under the blanket with him. “Heading to a city called ‘New York.’”

“One of their great cities,” Loki replied. With her warmth added to the bed, the weight of the day – of traveling, of the stress of yesterday’s folly and the sentence of the traitor Vildar, of the weaving of his plan – pressed in on his mind. Sif was War and she was muscle and sinew and bone, but she had become comfort, the walls of the keep behind which Loki felt secure enough to relax his own guard. “SHIELD has a major installation there, I am told.”

“They run before Surtur when they ought to stand and fight.” Sif curled a hand around his bicep, stretching out – and he felt her grin against his neck. “You changed the furniture.”

“The bed could barely fit me, much less both of us. I improved it.”

“I cannot complain.” She fell silent, but Loki felt her eyelashes against his skin every time she blinked. At last she spoke again.

“You have been troubled all day.”

“I have been thinking all day.”

“The two are the same with you of late.” Sif sighed as his fingers threaded through her hair. “Something weighs upon your mind.”

“The Tesseract. Surtur.” Loki stared up into the darkness that pooled on the ceiling above them. “Things that must be done.”

“Loki…”

He felt her hand slide down his arm, her calloused fingertips fitting easily in between his long, slender fingers, and drew in a breath.

“I cannot tell you now,” he said. “Soon, Sif. I give you my word.”

She sighed again, but her hand tightened on his. “Then I will hold you to it. I…I do not like seeing you thus, Loki.”

“I know.” They were both quiet for a time before Loki turned his head, letting the scent of her hair and whatever she had used on it fill his nose. “Sleep now. You will need it if you and Agent Romanoff intend to beat each other into a pulp again.”

Sif was still smiling when he felt her relax and heard her breathing slow and deepen, but sleep did not find Loki for a very long time.

*
They were in the lab when it happened.

One minute things were normal – well, as normal as they could be, anyway, with Jane and Loki going over equations at one station and Tony bothering Bruce at another. A soft, insistent beeping was coming from somewhere.

Bruce was the first to notice it, dodging the screwdriver Tony had in his hand to push tools and sheets of smart paper around on the countertop. “What’s that noise?”

Jane looked up, her eyes going wide as she saw a window blinking on one of the other displays. “It’s the detector,” she whispered. “It’s—“

Then everything literally went sideways.

The deck tilted crazily to one side; papers and parts and anything not nailed down to the countertops slid off them and crashed against the corridor-side wall. Loki bounced off the edge of a countertop – taking the blow across his back – and then had Jane land on him, knocking the wind out of him as the lights flickered and went dark. He could hear Tony swearing loudly and colorfully. Bruce was breathing heavily somewhere else, panting through his teeth.

“Are you all right?” he wheezed at Jane. She groaned, put her elbow into his stomach trying to right herself, but then things leveled and she rolled off and onto the floor. One of the swivel displays swung back around and nearly hit Loki as he followed her, scrambling to his feet as soon as he could.

The lights flickered back on, accompanied by a voice over the loudspeaker – Hill, Loki remembered, they’d met at breakfast this morning. “Scramble security teams to the main flight deck and the command center!” she was saying. “Incoming enemy targets!”

“The detector,” Jane whispered. Loki grabbed her elbow and hauled her to her feet, dragging her past Tony and Bruce and out into the corridor. SHIELD agents, some in armor and some trying to get into armor, were running both ways. “It went off right before everything went crazy. It detected some kind of particle field like your magic.”

“I was not using any.”

“I know. Something else was.”

“Hold on to this for a moment.” He unclipped his ID and handed it to Jane as his battle garb shimmered into existence, taking the badge back from her and tucking it into a pocket as they ran aft to the nearest deck access.

The lights flickered again, and someone ran into them from a side corridor. Loki felt armor, smelled — “Sif?”

“What has happened?”

“There are incoming… somethings.” Natasha’s voice put her behind Sif. “Deck access is down three corridors, hang a right.” The lights flickered back and Loki saw she was looking grim as she pressed a hand to her ear. “I’ve got to get back to the Tesseract lab. Dr. Banner—“

“Go,” Sif told her. “We are warriors, Agent, we know our roles.”

As they ran, Sif filled them in on what she knew. She and Natasha had been in the training room when they had been attacked by some force that the humans could not recognize. Sif and Natasha
had seen them through the windows – strange winged beasts, similar in form to the ones that had attacked the base in Albuquerque, ridden by fire giants, wheeling around the ship. A group had been busy taking down one of the escort planes when she and Natasha had run for the lab.

“The giants are boarding the ship,” Sif explained as they turned down the access corridor, the wind from outside tugging at their clothes. Outside they could hear gunfire and shouting. “The humans hold them for now, but they need our aid.”

“Then they will have it.”

Jane had to grab a mask from beside the hatch but Sif and Loki burst out into bright sunlight filled with the sound of battle. The three of them half-ran, crouched over, to where a group of agents with guns had taken cover. Sif grabbed one and spun him around.

“Where?”

He pointed down the deck. “There!” he said. “Captain America’s got some of the ones that’ve landed!”

Sif’s lips curled up into a grin as she pulled out her glaive but did not extend it yet. “Coming, husband?” she asked as she slid her shield onto her arm.

“Oh, I would just be in your way.” Loki – all three of the Lokis suddenly standing on the deck – returned her grin. “It appears you will both be in need of a distraction, though. You know I am so good at those.”

“One must play to one’s strengths.” And Sif was off, her armor flashing in the light as she dove into battle. Two of Loki’s clones flickered after her; they were difficult for Jane to focus on, her eyes seeming to slide away from them as they moved.

Thunder rumbled and a moment later Thor landed on the deck in front of them. “Loki—Brother, they are using some kind of portal, but—“

“Where?”

Thor pointed up to where there was a flickering flight at the top of the structure towering over the deck runways. “I cannot break it.”

“Of course you cannot, Thor, this is my area of expertise, I—“ Thor suddenly grabbed Loki by the arm, and Loki suddenly went even more pale. “Thor, no, do not dare take—“

His words were lost in the wind as Thor whirled Mjolnir and launched them both into the sky, arcing over the decks and dodging passes made by giants on their winged beasts.

Jane crouched down with the other agents, watching the red streak of Thor’s cape. This, she thought, was the bad part of being a superhero’s girlfriend.

* 

Fury grabbed the edge of the display for support as the Helicarrier rocked again. “Hill! Status report!”

“Most of the fighting is still on deck, sir!” Hill didn’t let go of her own handhold as her other arm stretched out, calling up status reports and watching displays. “Sif and the Captain are aft on the lower runway deck – Thor and Loki are doing something with that doorway on top of the tower –
Hawkeye is just below them, he’s got visual –“

“Romanoff? Stark? Banner?”

“They’re all on Research level two—“ Hill’s eyes went wide with fear. “Banner has…“

Fury gripped the display so hard his knuckles paled. My team is everywhere except together, he thought irritably, and pressed a hand to his earpiece. “Romanoff?”

A moment later her voice crackled in his ear. “Stark and I are working on it, sir.”

“You and Stark?”

There was a roar, followed by a grunt from Romanoff and a crash. “I need a moment here, Director!”

Fury let that go. The Helicarrier was still losing altitude, and they weren’t over the Atlantic yet. “Ahead full!” he yelled over the din. “We’ve got a hundred and fifty miles of Mexico before we’re over the gulf! I want this ship over water before she goes down any more!”

In the meantime, he reached over and pulled up security feeds from the deck. All he could do right now was watch.

* *

“Never again,” Loki was muttering as he crouched on the roof of the tower, the wind whipping his coat out behind him.

“You were not going to climb up,” Thor pointed out. “But look here – this is anchored by these stones.” He pointed Mjolnir at a piece of black glassy rock painted with runes.

“Have you tried smashing them?”

“They are magic. They are your realm.”

Loki gave his brother a very long and level stare. “For once, Thor, you are using your mind.” He sent tendrils of magic probing into the portal, into the spells anchoring it to the stones. No brush of a fiery presence here; Surtur had no personal hand in this. A knot of tension eased up in his stomach. That would make things less complicated later on, that and the fact Thor had left the stones alone.

“Can you close it?”

“If you stop talking, perhaps.”

It was not a complex portal either; the trick had been in opening it long enough for one or two to get through and place the stones so that the portal had an anchor point. The spells holding it were like ropes anchoring a ship to a dock – cut enough, give the ship enough push, and it would snap the rest. Two will do it, Loki thought, and pulled up his magic.

“Keep them away from me!” he yelled over his shoulder and the roar of the wind. “Once they realize what I am doing they will try to stop me!”

Thor grinned, and the air began to crackle with static charge. Loki turned back to the portal and went to work.

*
Sif thrust her sword up into the chest of one of the giants; it gurgled, spitting black blood all over her and the deck, and with a noise of disgust Sif planted her boot firmly on its torso and pulled her blade back out. The deck around her and the Captain – he was extremely proficient with that shield of his, using it for both defense and offense and switching between the two effortlessly – was littered with the bodies of giants and their mounts, and even she had to admit the kill count between the two of them was closer to equal than she’d thought.

Steve put a hand to his ear and then looked at her. “The hatchway we came out through!” he said. “They’re surrounded!”

Sif nodded, tightening her grip on her shield again. “Better go give them aid!”

Lightning flashed across the sky above them and Sif looked up. The sky was still thick with enemies wheeling about, but between the archer loosing arrows from his perch, Thor’s command of the lightning, and the deep womp-womp of the ship’s strange cannons, she could see their ranks were beginning to thin, and the portal up on top of the tower looked dangerously unstable.

*End it quickly, Loki*, she thought, and ran.

The fighting was thick around the hatch; having realized it was one of the quickest ways inside now that the hanger bay and lift doors had been shut, the giants were trying to overwhelm the defenders there with their sheer size and numbers. It would be close quarters. Sif kept her glaive collapsed into just the one blade and dove back into the fray.

Steve seemed to know – or at least had figured out – how to insert himself into the gaps in her offense and when she needed defense. She twisted, stabbing one giant in the stomach, yanked her sword out to chop off another’s arm as it swung a mace made out of obsidian down toward her.

Something connected with her shoulder, sent her spinning. Sif went down to a knee and nearly lost her grip on her sword, only barely getting her shield up in time to keep the giant’s wickedly jagged blade from taking her arm. The blow was solid and rattled her, but the warrior clenched her teeth, crouched, and sprang forward. The giant lost his head, and Sif nearly lost her balance when she landed on a slick patch of blood, skidding to face Steve.

His blue eyes went wide through his blue helm. “Behind you—Sif, turn—!”

A shot rang out, and Sif completed her turn in time to watch a giant fall over with a smoking hole in its chest, and Jane standing up behind the barricade holding a gun. Her surprised expression was a match for the one the dead giant wore.

Sif grinned, raising her sword in salute. “A worthy warrior after all,” she said. “My thanks—“

A giant bowled into her and Sif had to cut herself off, but she was still grinning as she took the giant’s head. Thor had truly found a surprising mortal.

* Loki ducked as another giant tried to use his winged mount to grab Loki and knock him off the tower. Thor was there beside him in a minute, lighting crackling from Mjolnir to the giant’s chest and his mount’s head, and they both fell to earth.

“Can you not work faster, Loki?”

Grinding his teeth, Loki reached into the second set of anchor spells and ripped, abandoning all finesse. The stone grew white-hot but did not crack, and the anchor point came free.
“Get back!” Loki yelled, and the both of them dropped down to the catwalk the archer was firing arrows from, watching as the portal wobbled, the edges wavering more and more until it collapsed entirely.

Thor clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Ha! That was well done!” he said. “We must—“

Loki cut him off. “I am going back up there.”

“What? Why?”

He gave Thor a very patient look. “Do you want those portal stones reused by the giants? I have to keep them out of their hands.”

Scowling a little, Thor grabbed Loki’s arm and lifted him up as he rose into the air, then flew off to join the battle. Loki slid around the tower roof collecting the obsidian stones before they slid off, and vanished them one by one. He’d need them later.

At the edge of the tower he looked down; the upper runway deck was far enough down for him to hesitate at simply jumping, and the tower slanted out before him. He pulled the shadows around him and reappeared at the tower’s base. Arrows whizzed by him, taking out two giants who had seen him and began running his way, and Loki darted between them as they were still falling to the deck.

“Finally decided to join us?” Sif called as he skidded through a long trail of blood and finally slowed beside her, flinging spell-wrapped daggers into the throats of two giants.

“Even I sometimes feel the need to dirty my hands!” he shouted in reply. Sif gave him a grin and slipped her shield onto her back.

It was an old pattern with them, one honed over centuries of quests and adventures. Thor’s fighting style, as bluntly effective as it was, did not have the level of refinement necessary for it, and the Warriors Three had always watched each other’s backs, but Loki and Sif had learned to keep an eye on each other. That was what they did now – back to back, Loki throwing spells and knives and both at once, Sif extending her glaive and dancing with her silver blades, a whirling wall that stopped everything it came into contact with.

They seemed to know exactly where the other was at all times, seamlessly moving their strikes high and low to accommodate, spinning and ducking and shifting position without thought or communication. By the time Stark in his armored suit, Natasha with two small pistols, and a giant green creature burst out of the hanger bay and into the sunlight of the deck, they only really had mop-up duty, and Sif and Loki were surrounded by a ring of corpses.

Stark flew off to track down some of the winged creatures that had escaped, leaving the rest of them to stand back and watch the green creature (Natasha called it the Hulk) charge off across the deck, scattering what few giants were left before it.

“So that is Bruce Banner in action,” Loki murmured, watching intently.

“The lab has been torn up,” Natasha told him as she pushed hair out of her face; somehow, even with blood trickling from a cut on her forehead and grime smeared across her, she managed to look cool, though whenever her eyes fell on the Hulk she seemed to go pale. “Data and material are being ported over to another one nearby, but the Hulk is… destructive.” They watched as it smashed two giants together and threw them over the edge of the deck. “Really destructive.”

A few minutes later Tony looped back around, picking up Barton on the way back and depositing him neatly beside everyone else before landing with a clank. “That was fun,” he said. “Recess is
almost over, though I don’t know that we’ve got a classroom to go back to yet.”

“Fury will want reports.”

“I don’t answer to Fury.” Tony popped his helmet off and tucked it under his arm. “If Fury can’t figure out that the Helicarrier was attacked by fiery people on wings, then that’s his problem.”

“It’s procedure to—“ Steve started, but Tony glared at him.

“Fury doesn’t own all of us.”

There was exasperation in Steve’s voice as he pulled off his helmet and the fabric cowl under it. “Fury doesn’t own me either, Stark,” he said, but sighed. “Now’s not the time for this. Did you get all the strays?”

“As many as I could find. Fury does realize there’s now a trail of alien bodies across central Mexico, right?”

“It’ll be taken care of.” Natasha pursed her lips though. “Fury will find a way.”

“He can’t hide this forever.”

“I don’t think he means to,” Steve said quietly.

With a roar, the Hulk threw down a last giant, and then his own body seemed to collapse in on itself. A howl of pain turned into a much weaker groan by the time Bruce stood, swaying dangerously back and forth on the deck.

“Banner?” Stark raised his eyebrows. “You look pretty bad, there.”

Bruce blinked, pushed sweaty hair out of his face with one hand as the other held up his torn slacks. “I…” He swallowed. “I could really use some water and a shower, thanks.”

Medics had begun trickling out on deck and getting everyone inside. Thor looped an arm around Jane and led her in himself, his red cape draped across her shoulders too; with the exception of Tony, who stayed out to harass Bruce as the medics looked him over, the rest of them filed inside, where Maria Hill and Coulson met them.

He had a very large gun slung across his back on a webbed strap, and there was a tiny smudge of ash on his collar, but he looked otherwise unruffled.

“A few managed to make it inside,” he explained, “Through the hangar bay. We took care of it.” He looked pleased.

“Fury is in the command center,” Hill added. “He’ll want to speak to all of you. We were left a little gift.”

Sif glanced over at Loki as they made their way through the detritus of battle in the broad corridor. Their shoulders and hands brushed, and she felt Loki grip hers hard for a moment. There was no fear in it though, and nothing of that in his face. Instead, he was smiling. It was such a rare expression on his face that Sif felt herself grinning in response.

“Are we needed right away?” she asked Natasha. The redhead turned and studied Sif and Loki for a moment before smiling a little herself.

“I think alien royalty can make whatever schedules they want,” she answered.

When everyone else turned toward the command center, Sif tugged Loki in the opposite direction,
and when he gave her a questioning look, she smiled.

“They are not the only ones who need you now,” she told him.

*

After dinner, Loki met Jane in the Tesseract room. It was undisturbed, still seated in its pedestal. Loki felt it tug at him, and turned away.

In the command center, Fury pushed another rune-covered piece of obsidian over to him. It was different than the portal stones, and after a moment studying the runes, Loki gave the spell wrapping the stone a small push.

Fire burst forth from it – illusory fire without heat – and the flames resolved themselves into a horned face, red fire licking from the eyes and the rest shaded in yellows and oranges.

“I am Surtur,” the illusion said. “Lord of Muspelheim.”

“If he’s going to start on a monologue…”

“Quiet, Stark.”

“Your efforts have been valiant,” and great flaming lips curled up in a sneer at that, “And I must commend you on enduring so long. Most mortals would not be able to, even with the aid of those they once called gods. But my patience wears thin. I will have the Tesseract, one way or the other, but I am not without mercy, and I am not without generosity.

“I will give you three days. You may do as you like with them, so long as the Tesseract is on the moon of Asgard known as Storslette by noon of the third day after this message is replayed. I have placed a tracking spell upon the stone so there is no chance of deception in matters of time. Of course, you are welcome to bring the Tesseract to me in Muspelheim, but I doubt your kind would find it hospitable at all.” The face grinned. “And certainly the Asgardians skulking about did not find it thus. I have dealt with them.”

Beside him, Sif’s hands tightened into fists. Loki kept his face impassive.

“If the Tesseract is not in my possession within those three days, I will unleash my army upon Midgard, upon your cities and your countries and your people, and I will laugh as it burns everything in its path. If, after Midgard is destroyed and I still do not have it, I will move on, realm by realm, moon by moon, until all is ash. I think you especially, Loki, second son of greater fathers, know I will find that most amenable.”

Loki felt eyes on him from around the table, but did not look away from the message.

“I leave it to you to make your decision,” Surtur finished. “Let it be a wise one.”

The heat off the gout of flame this time was real, and everyone pushed back from the table. The shiny glass surface was singed and blackened around the stone, but when Loki went to pick it up, the rock itself was perfectly cool.

“Well,” Bruce said. He’d changed into a worn button-down and khakis. “He seems like a charming kinda guy.”

“He’s a megalomaniac who fails at theatrics,” Tony muttered, but he looked disturbed.
“He’s a threat,” Steve said. “And we need a plan of action. He’ll be on this moon – this Storslette place – in three days. I say we let him come and then take him down there.”

“He will come with his army,” Sif said. “He will expect some kind of trap or attack at that point. In any case, bringing the Tesseract so close to him is not an option.”

“It isn’t,” Fury agreed. “I am not letting the Tesseract off this planet. But I think that’s been made abundantly clear at this point.”

“Loki,” Steve said after a moment, “Is there some way you can duplicate the Tesseract? Not necessarily make another one, but just… the way it feels? I don’t know much about how your magic works, sir, but I think if we can fool this guy into thinking he’s getting the real deal, he’ll let his guard down long enough for us to do some damage.”

Loki hesitated a moment before replying, measuring his words out slowly. “It is… possible. Though I do not know that Surtur would take this bait. He is dull in many ways, but not so much as to let himself be easily fooled when it comes to his prize. It may buy us time, as you say.”

“Then we’ll explore that as an option.” Fury straightened. “Go get some sleep. We’re starting early tomorrow.”

* 

Loki woke, cold.

It wasn’t a nightmare that had shocked him out of sleep – though he did not mind the interruption, for the dream had been dark and unpleasant even so – and for a moment Loki could not place what it was that had. But then he felt it, and his blood chilled even more, becoming as icy as the snowfields of his birth.

It was a tug. A mental pull, a summons, from something far more powerful than he was, and Loki sat up, staring into the darkness as his mind whirled.

Sif had not awoken with him; they had tended each other’s wounds after she had pulled him away. Though the excitement of battle had been bright in her eyes, Sif had taken care with him, and though their hands had wandered they had not taken it further. There had been no need or desire for it, simply the need to touch and caress and run fingers over bare skin. She slept now, her hair like an inkspot against the white sheets. Her brow was furrowed, but smoothed out when Loki reached over and stroked her cheek, tucked her hair behind her ear. He waited until she was quiet again before sliding from the bed and pulling the blanket up to cover her bare shoulders as his clothes materialized.

Loki hesitated a moment longer over her, despite the insistence of the magical pull, and leaned over to press his lips to her temple. “Sleep, Sif,” he murmured into her ear. Then he pulled the shadows around him and let the magic pull him along it like a tether, reappearing (unsurprisingly) in the Tesseract lab. Without hesitation he turned his gaze upon the thing that had called him here.

It was pulsing a brighter blue than usual, the screens around it fuzzing out in time with the flashes of light, and here inside the room Loki could feel it washing over his skin in waves of power so cold they felt warm. The sensation only intensified as he thumbed the control that lowered the glass shield around the Tesseract.

“So now that I am here,” he murmured, feeling his vision start to fade to blue as he reached out with a hand, “What is it you want?”
His fingers hesitated only a moment before they closed around the Tesseract and pulled it from its pedestal. “You called me here,” he said. “Show me. Show me everything.”

Loki felt a surge of triumph, and then everything faded into a uniform blue.

*

He was walking down a long hallway in a building. The Loki watching this did not recognize it; some of it seemed to be Asgardian in design, the ceilings high and grand and airy, but other parts were Midgardian, and blended seamlessly into the alien work. The Loki walking down the hallway knew it well, however, knew exactly how many steps it would take to go from his study in the apartments of the Royal Family to the audience chamber where he was presently making his way.

The escort – guards in what was again a blend of Midgard and Asgard armor – paused, and opened the door to an opulent antechamber. It was here that Loki got a look at himself in a full-length mirror. Taller, prouder horns curved up from his golden helm; his gold-adorned jacket and the trim that his cape fell from were strange to him, but this Loki wore them with confidence and comfort. It felt natural to be in this garb.

The moment passed when a mortal in green and gold livery entered and bowed. “My lord,” she said, keeping her eyes on the floor. “They await you.”

His vision shifted and they were suddenly somewhere else, and Loki saw himself crowned in full glory, and all were arrayed below him. Fury, Stark, the rest – all bent the knee and bowed their heads in acknowledgement of his sovereignty. There were others beyond them – Asgardian nobility, those who had scoffed at him before, who had mocked what they thought of as the womanly ways of magic and his affinity for books and statecraft rather than warfare. Loki ignored them, for his attention was on those closer, those who had compared him to Thor and found him lacking.

The Warriors Three were there and they bowed too, no sign of hesitancy or nervousness about them as they swore fealty to him, to the king of all. His mother was there too, her skirts pooled on the floor about her as she knelt and bowed her head with its Heron crown, and… Loki-that-watched felt his chest tighten as he saw the Allfather bow too, his one eye closed in respect. And before them all…

Thor bent the knee, his blond hair falling about his shoulders and cape fanned out over the stone floor behind him.

“I swear fealty to my brother, first of the House of Odin though second-born,” he said, and Loki-that-was in this place felt a surge of elation. Loki-that-watched felt it too, but secondhand, as though in sympathy.

It was, he realized sluggishly (his mind was not working properly), an emotion that was not his own. But nor was it entirely Loki-that-was, either.

“See,” whispered a voice beside him—

*

As a fledgling warrior Sif was used to sleeping lightly; when she had begun her training and had insisted (stupidly, perhaps) on sleeping in the barracks with the other trainees, their instructors spent a period of time occasionally coming through the barracks and shouting for attention. The last one standing was burdened with twice the chores and exercises for their laziness. It had taught them to sleep lightly, for battle could not always be joined during the day and in neatly arrayed rows.

Adrenaline still sang in her veins after the day’s fight, but at first Sif was not sure what it was that
had awakened her, and she blinked into the darkness for a moment trying to think of it. The click of a door? The crackle of a guard’s radio, far down the corridor?

“Loki,” she mumbled, turning over—and that was when she realized what it had been that had woken her. Loki was gone. Her hand rested on the indentation his body had left in the sheets – still a little warm, so not long gone.

She rose and pulled on her leggings and tunic, grabbing her ID almost as an afterthought, and hoped she was wrong about where she thought he had gone.

*

A hand in his, two rulers for the Nine Realms and for all things beyond the Nine Realms, worlds that had never nestled in the branches of Yggdrasil, places the Tesseract had only begun to reveal to them.

“Loki—“

Gilt armor flashed in the light, the kind of craftsmanship that was only right and proper for his queen. He could finally give her all the things he had always known she deserved, the things he had never thought himself capable of giving her, worthy of giving her—

“—oki…”

Crowned in gold on a throne of ice, frost in his hair and his eyes as he watched Thor kill a traitor in the throne room for his dearest brother, his king—

No, Loki-that-watched thought to himself. That isn’t how it would be.

From somewhere, Loki felt a thread of desperation.

*

The agents who passed her in the halls gave her curious looks for her bare feet and sleep-tossed hair, but Sif ignored them and made her way purposefully to the corridor outside the now-ruined Tesseract workspace. From the hole in the wall she could the door to the room the cube was held in was still shut, but that meant nothing to her.

She picked her way through the rubble that hadn’t been swept to either side yet until she stood before it. The Tesseract's power, stronger than before, made her sick to her stomach. But she ground her teeth and bore it, slamming her fist against the door.

“Loki!” she called out. “Loki—!”

Her ID badge fell off the fold of her tunic she’d clipped it to and Sif paused, staring down at it. It would get her into anywhere she needed to be, Coulson had said. Picking it up, she looked at the locking mechanism on the door – yes, there was a slot that looked as though it would fit her card.

Sif slipped it in.

*

Sif, crowned and glorious before him—

No, something isn’t right here—
But what could be more right than seeing her thus, if it was not also seeing Sif in battle, her teeth bared in victory over a foe, and it was the same expression she wore when she made him come undone for her.

“Loki, please—“

*Something’s not right—*

“He will be a strong son for us, Loki.”

The Loki-that-watched felt his heart stop at her words, at the sight of Sif with her head bowed and a hand on the great curve of her belly, smiling as she felt their child move within her.

“Why do you not—“

A boy with dark curls and hazel eyes ran toward him, and Loki-that-watched wanted nothing more than to be the one who was picking him up, spinning him into the air with magic and catching him, a relaxed smile on his face, cold eyes warming as the boy laughed in delight. Loki-that-watched wanted to lose himself in his son’s joyful play, in the awe he felt at the sight of Sif and their son—

“His name is—“

No!

Wasn’t this what he wanted, though? The other presence in his mind had a mocking tone, one that nettled Loki and put him on edge even as he watched his family – his possible family. Did Loki not want power, respect, the things he had always been denied as he skulked in the shadow of his older brother? Did he not want the ability to exact revenge in his way?

The worst of it was, a part of Loki did want it. A not-insignificant part that railed against him as he tried to pull away from the idyll before him.

*Not like this,* he thought.

The edges of his vision began to go blue, to bite at him like hard frost, like animals. He must see the reason here, he must…

*I must see nothing!*

Anger – at the rejection, at his recalcitrance. When did Loki become so soft, so noble? the voice taunted him. Did he deny he wanted these things, the gifts he could have if he only did as asked?

*Yes, but—*

And for Sif? What of she who had given up so much to sit beside him in Gladsheim. She whom Loki had wanted since they were young and before he could even put a name to it, she whom he perhaps even lov—

“No!” Rage filled Loki at the attempt, the very thought of that being used to goad him. That was something impossibly pure in him – for though Loki had no illusions about himself, knew that his heart and soul were smeared with black for all his misdeeds and his lies, Sif firmly occupied one of the very few spots that was clean.

“I would not! I—“ Loki cried out as pain overwhelmed him, images flashing before him faster and faster. His mother and father turning away from him in shame, Thor bringing Mjolnir to bear against
him with anger in his eyes, all three of them dead by Loki’s own hand and Asgard burning, ash and smoke and blood coating the streets and all of it his doing. Sif—

*Gods above, no-*

Sif holding their son’s body in her wounded arms as heartbroken sobs wracked her shoulders, Sif looking down as he drove the point of some strange spear into her belly, Sif crying and coughing blood as she plunged a knife into his heart and Yggdrasil itself burned around them, ash drifting down from the sky, Ragnarok the end of days—

Loki *pushed* but it was not with magic. No, this power was something far greater than any spell he had ever wrought, something he had never touched before. And to his surprise, the other presence in his mind *screamed* in pain, and the blue retreated, the pain faded, until all Loki could see was darkness.

The first thing to come back was sensation. Loki felt warm arms around him – someone pressed against his back, fingernails digging into the leather shoulders of his coat. Muscle, steel – Sif, then. Loki exhaled and opened his eyes.

The Tesseract was balanced precariously on the tips of his fingers. It was white-hot on his skin but he still took care sliding it back into its brackets and raising the glass shield around it. His hands went to Sif’s, and he ignored the pain as he covered her hands.

She stirred against his back, and the softness of her voice made his chest ache strangely. “Loki?”

“It is done,” he whispered, and turned, taking her hands.

They both stood there silently for what seemed like hours, until Sif turned her face up to him, eyes searching for a moment before she swallowed and asked, “Will you come back to bed?”

He nodded, and laced their fingers. “Sif,” he said as they left the Tesseract lab. “There are things that I have to tell you.”

*

He ended up telling her all of it – from the vision Surtur had pushed into his mind through the portal in Asgard, to what the Tesseract had shown him and how it had been affecting him, everything he ought to have told her long ago. She paled when he told her the part of the Tesseract’s vision that had Asgard in flames, but he understood when she said it was because of her own nightmare.

When they had finished, Sif was quiet, leaning against the wall one side of their bed was on. Loki simply watched her, giving her time to process what had been said, until at last she wet her lips. “So. What is your plan now?”

“I am going to do what must be done,” he replied slowly. “The things that are not pleasant but which are necessary have always fallen to me, and I mean to carry this one through as well. The Tesseract must leave here.”

“SHIELD – Fury will never allow it—“

“I am through with waiting for Fury,” Loki snapped. “But for him, none of this would have happened today, and I would not have had to see…”

He trailed off, reaching instead for her hand. Sif twined their fingers together.
“See what?” Sif was watching him, her eyes bluer than usual in the light. “A twisted version of the future something wanted for you – that you want for us? Surely you can separate fact and fantasy, Loki, as…” she swallowed thickly, “As pleasing as that fantasy may be.”

“Sif…” Loki took a breath. “If what I planned was abhorrent to you, but would benefit Asgard, would you allow it? How far would you go for the Realm Eternal?”

Sif was watching him warily now, fear sparking in her face. “Loki—“

“How far?”

She met his eyes defiantly at last. “I am sworn thrice over to the Realm Eternal,” she replied proudly. “By my sword, by my marriage, by my oaths as queen, I serve it. Asgard is my home and I will protect it by whatever means necessary, if it came to my last breath.”

Loki closed his eyes. He had known the answer before he asked, but he had to hear it. She had to remember she said it.

“You know that I trust you, Sif,” he said. “I know it means more to you than the sharpest blade that I do. But do you trust me?”

He was surprised and very pleased when she reached over and raised his chin so they were looking each other in the eye again. “Yes,” she whispered, without hesitation or falsity. “Yes, Loki, I trust you.”

Elation mixed with the sinking feeling in his stomach as he smiled at her. Shaky and small, but a true smile.

“Then I must ask too much of you, Sif,” he said. “Let me tell you what I have planned.”
Differentiation

Chapter Notes

I make any apologies necessary for this chapter now; it's a lot of setup for the last two chapters, and as such I move a lot of people and objects around very quickly. Without my betas both giving me gentle corrections and smacks upside the head, it wouldn't have been posted anytime soon for my crippling insecurities about it.

differentiation; In developmental biology, cellular differentiation is the process by which a less specialized cell becomes a more specialized cell type. Differentiation occurs numerous times during the development of a multicellular organism as the organism changes from a simple zygote to a complex system of tissues and cell types.

“My lord, the tracking spell has been activated.”

Standing on a ledge to one side of his throne room, Surtur did not turn to look at the groveling creature that had brought him this news. He had held no illusions that the message stone would be activated so soon after its delivery, nor had he actually believed for a moment that the force of Fire Giants he had sent would succeed in procuring the Tesseract where so many others had failed. No, Surtur thought he knew how the Tesseract would arrive into his hands. In fact, he counted on it.

“Set a watch on the moon of Storslette,” he said. “Report any arrivals to me, and make preparations for the army to muster and depart.” He reached across the void for the familiar cord of spells attached to the message stone and unraveled the thread of the tracking spell, tying it to himself. When it was time, he would know, if things did not go according to his plans.

“It will be done at once, my lord.” The messenger scurried away, her claws scraping on the hot reddish stone that the room had been carved out of. Surtur listened to her go, a nasty smile forming on his face.

The other in the room was silent, waiting for him to speak. Between Muspelheim’s fires and the heavy, obscuring cloak and hood, it was swelteringly hot. But the other didn’t complain, or speak until the sounds of the messenger’s passing had completely faded into the background noise of the realm. When they did speak, their voice was strange, neither masculine nor feminine but something in between and obscured by magic. “Things move quickly.”

“Yes. It won’t be long now,” he said, and turned away from the ledge. The camps, stretched out endlessly over expanses of black rock, would soon be emptying. Asgard had grown soft and complacent, their previous encounters with his army had proven that to him. Oh, certainly they had come out ahead, and that whelp of a warrior queen had enjoyed her victories, but against the full might of Muspelheim they would break and run before him in terror.

“You seem confident the Tesseract will be yours before the battle is to be joined.”

“No reason to think it won’t be.” Surtur caressed the hilt of Twilight as he passed its stand to go lounge upon his throne. “It has called out to me across space and shown me that what it desires and what I intend are one and the same, and that for all his masks, Asgard’s king does not have the same… substance as his brother.”
“You believe Loki will bend.”

“It’s what he does, is it not?” Surtur narrowed eyes the color of a hot flame. “It is what brought you to me in the first place, yes?”

“I have my own reasons for wishing to be in your presence, Surtur, Lord of Muspelheim,” the other replied smoothly. “Loki bows under pressure because it is in his nature to do so. He has not the strength of his brother or even of his queen. Though,” and here the other’s voice became pensive, “Perhaps he is changing. He put on quite a display when Vildar was discovered. We were watching.”

“Vildar was a fool,” Surtur sneered. “An overambitious, vainglorious, useful fool. He deserved his fate all the same.”

“He did.” The other was quiet a moment. “You are right, of course. The Tesseract has shown Loki what he could have. He may play at being the selfless, noble king, but one cannot ever completely rid oneself of certain traits. Selfishness, jealousy, greed – Loki’s lot will drive him to it. He will surely bring you the Tesseract, my lord.”

“I know.” Surtur balanced Twilight on its point; the tip ground a divot into the rocky floor. “Tell those who guard my fastness to keep watch for him, though I doubt he will arrive by the main road.”

“He is far more subtle than that, my lord.” The other made a slight bow. “By your leave, then.”

At an imperious wave from Surtur the other left, stepping into the square of portal stones and vanishing in a huge gout of flame. The lord of Muspelheim glared at the scorch mark on the stone for a moment, until his mouth curled up into a toothy grin.

Soon, he thought. *Doom will be upon the Nine Realms, and Yggdrasil herself will burn, and there will be nothing to stop the flames.*

Sunrise saw the Helicarrier putting down in the Gulf of Mexico. Had they been able to stay airborne they would have been over the Atlantic by now, but Fury had not wanted to risk the repair crews as they examined the hull for damage and repaired what they found. The fire giants hadn’t been stupid; they knew that the turbines kept the Helicarrier aloft, and so had tried to rip them to shreds. Tony pulled himself away from work on the Tesseract project to boss around one of the crews – not that there was much work to be done, with the main lab destroyed and their equipment once more ruined. Bruce was apologetic and everyone had expressed their understanding, but it was nonetheless a setback.

As a result, the dining hall on the Helicarrier was packed at this hour, people from different shifts mingling and talking softly about what they’d seen and what had happened. When they’d signed on with SHIELD they’d expected strange – they’d *wanted* it, sought it out, and figured that if they didn’t have that then they’d never have been taken on – but when strange actually happened to them, the initial result was confusion.

That morning the conversation was muted. Some of those in the hall were injured, eating slowly while maneuvering around with casts or slings. Everyone was pale-faced and red-eyed, because nobody had gotten any sleep during the night. The faint sounds of repair were louder than the murmur of voices.

So it wasn’t surprising that when Sif stormed into the dining hall and slammed her glaive down onto
the nearest table, silence fell quickly as everyone froze in what they were doing. It was unusual enough for Sif to be here at all – everyone knew the aliens ate separately, they’d been spotted wandering around with people like Tony Stark and Captain America and the two assassins – but here she was. The table was dented with the force she’d used, and the people sitting nearest at her chosen table tried to edge away without appearing to do so. They stopped when Sif turned her glare on them.

“What does one have to do to get one’s own food in this place?” she snapped.

The group nearest her exchanged looks. One of the women with a big L on her badge marking her as a Linguistics staff member finally cleared her throat and stood, pushing short brown hair out of her eyes.

“Let me, um, show you,” she said a little breathlessly. “Please. Your Majesty.”

When they’d gone through the line (nobody seemed to have any problem with moving aside and letting Sif do as she pleased) and Sif was seated back with her gear, she proceeded to ignore everyone around her and dig into it, and the angry line of her shoulders, the way her knuckles whitened as they gripped her utensils, stalled any attempts at conversation with her. Slowly, a buzz began to fill the hall again, but everyone was quieter than before.

Things only got more tense when Loki paused in the doorway on his way to somewhere else. As people noticed him the room went silent again, a ripple that spread as he threaded his way between tables to stand at Sif’s elbow.

She didn’t look up, but her irritation was evident in her voice. “What do you want?”

“You were not at breakfast.”

“I am having it here.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps because I wanted to, Loki.” She glared up at him. “Not everyone wants to let themselves fit neatly into your schemes.”

Loki spread his hands, but his expression was somewhere between insincere and frigid. “It was only breakfast, not a scheme.”

Sif snorted and turned back to her food. “Who can be sure? Leave me be, husband, I’ve no desire to ruin my appetite with another disagreement.”

The air seemed to chill as Loki glowered at the back of her head when she pointedly turned her body away from him. “As you wish,” he retorted, before spinning on his heel and walking out so fast that people scrambled to the sides to let him go.

All was silent, all eyes on Sif, who had paused to turn her head slightly to watch him leave. When she realized that everyone was watching her, though, she glared round at everyone.

“Is there something the matter?” she growled.

A quick chorus of negative responses followed that, along with the very busy sounds of utensils clattering against bowls and the hum of conversation. Everyone could agree, though. Aliens were weird.
Natasha grunted as her shoulders hit the training mat when she dropped, rolling away just in time to avoid being struck by the wooden staff Sif had chosen to represent her glaive. Back when SHIELD was first outfitting the ‘carrier Natasha had been the one to suggest stocking less modern weapons in the training rooms – the logic being that not all foes would use modern weapons – but she hadn’t had annoyed goddess warriors in mind when she’d made the choice. Natasha was deadly with just about anything she could get her hands on, but she just couldn’t compare to the fact that Sif’s baseline strength and speed were greater than her own.

Natasha grabbed up her own staff from where she’d dropped it and got it up in time to block, gritting her teeth as Sif bore down for a moment. Just when her arms were shaking to the point of near collapse, she lashed out with a foot to sweep Sif off balance. She didn’t bother to pull it or at all moderate the amount of strength she used. Sif could, and did, take it – though at least it had the desired effect.

That told Natasha a lot. “You’re distracted,” she panted out, rising fluidly to her feet and going on the offensive. Sif ground her teeth loud enough to be audible and leaped forward again, but it was uncontrolled and the Widow dodged easily.

“You are being distracting,” she snapped in reply. “Is this one of your tactics in battle?” Natasha could not immediately respond – Sif’s flurry of attacks occupied her attention – but when she got the chance she kicked Sif square in the middle of her abdomen and knocked her over.

“It’s not usually so easy.” Natasha leaned on her staff, reaching out to help Sif back up and flexing her fingers to ease the pain caused by an inhumanly strong grip. “So.”

Sif glared for a moment, but when she sighed and sat herself carefully on the floor mat, Natasha very carefully kept her face neutral. From what she’d seen with these Asgardians, they had a great deal of pride. Useful knowledge, but it sometimes made conversation with them tricky. Fury had wanted her to try and find out what had kicked off that argument in the dining hall this morning, and the last thing Natasha wanted was to put an end to things before they even began. She had a reputation, after all.

“You wish to ask if this had something to do with my outburst in the dining hall. I assume you have heard of it by now?” There was a wry note in Sif’s voice, but her whole body had slumped a bit, as though she was tired. When Natasha raised an eyebrow, Sif pursed her lips, looking away.

“He is difficult to live with, betimes,” she said quietly. “Always his mind is layers and plans and possibilities. You and I are warriors, in our own ways. We do plan, we do think ahead… but not like him. We may be wed, but I do not always understand him even now, and especially not when he becomes…” Sif waved her hand. “As he is. Enigmatic and closed.”

“Something happen?”

“I cannot be certain.” Sif’s eyes flicked to her, then back. “The Tesseract calls out to the darkness in us, he says. Loki has much more of darkness in his heart than he does of light.”

Natasha’s mind whirled with that. She felt unsettled around the Tesseract – brittle, like a strong push might shatter the control she had spent long years perfecting. If that was how it made her feel, then she didn’t want to think about what would happen if one of the godlike aliens on board, or someone like Dr. Banner, lost it. Her blood chilled a bit to think that Banner had been spending a lot of time around the Tesseract, and so had Tony, and Captain Rogers…
“Do you think he’s a risk?”

Sif gave her a very level look. “If you do not believe he is dangerous even without the Tesseract to influence him, then you are a fool, Natasha Romanoff, and I would be very disappointed.”

She put her hands up and let them fall to the mat again. “All right, I understand.”

Sif gave her a look out from behind her lashes. “Do you ask so you may try to stop him now?”

“It’s not the nature of SHIELD to take preemptive action.” Not precisely true, but Natasha had a funny feeling about the level of honesty in the whole conversation. “Unless he does something, our hands are tied.”

That seemed to satisfy her, and Natasha reached over the edge of the mat and grabbed their water bottles, making sure none of her thoughts showed on her face. Something about all this was fishy. Sif’s reactions and unrest were genuine – Natasha had been in the business long enough to know that for certain – but there was some subtle flaw in what had been presented to her, some undercurrent she couldn’t quite catch herself on.

Natasha pursed her lips a moment before masking the action with a sip of water. She’d have to tell Director Fury, but for now she’d simply keep an eye on things.

*

For the fifth time in half an hour, Jane had to stop and rub her temples, then the back of her neck to try and relieve the tension. She had gotten used to their group’s bickering nature easily – that wasn’t the problem – but when the bickering turned into actual arguing, Jane felt the urge to either turn and take her work elsewhere or yell at them, and she hadn’t yet decided which one she was going to go with.

It was mostly Loki and Tony (again), and it wasn’t even anything interesting or relevant to their work, as far as she could tell. Jane kept trying to tune them out, but couldn’t for some reason. Her headaches were usually manageable by simply focusing, but today it felt like someone was stabbing her in the forehead with a nail, and every time the two men started raising their voices again, it worsened. Even Bruce was looking unhappy, shifting from one workstation to the other and glancing over at them. If he wasn’t comfortable… well, Jane had seen what he’d done to the other lab and what he was like when he changed. She didn’t want that happening in here.

“You’d think they’d run out of things to argue about after long enough,” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

Bruce gave her a tight-lipped smile and adjusted the slider bars on his display; the waveforms for the Tesseract’s emissions and detected readings from Loki’s magic and the Bifrost all shifted. “You’d think. I wish they’d just work, because I don’t think they’ll ever get tired of pushing each other’s buttons.” He tapped the ‘Run Simulation’ box that popped up and leaned on the lab bench, taking off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “It’s strange, though…”

Jane watched the numbers scroll across her own display from the simulation, and in another box edited rune-and-math code to fit. They were close – it was really only a matter of refinement now. If they could manage to work without tearing each other apart. “What’s strange?”

Bruce glanced over at Loki and Tony, who mercifully had left off their arguing and were walking over. “Nothing,” he said quickly. “It’s nothing. Probably.”

“What’s nothing?”
When Bruce hesitated Jane jumped in. “Just a blip in the simulation,” she said, indicating a strange spike in output. “Probably some kind of statistical anomaly.”

“One that we had best investigate,” Loki said. He did not glance over at Tony, but it was clear his next words were directed to the other man. “Unless, of course, our resident expert on all matters magical knows better than the actual sorcerer, and decides otherwise.”

“Lay off,” Tony snapped. “That’s not what this is about.”

“And what is it about, pray tell?” Loki did look over this time, eyes just slightly narrowed. “Oh no – this is about your ego, as it always is – “

“And it’s not about yours?” Tony snorted. “You have the biggest case of little brother syndrome in the universe, Sparkles, you’re doing this because it lets you lord it over everyone else.”

Loki’s jaw tightened, and Jane glanced down to see his hands slowly curling into fists. “Even if that were the case—“

“Which it totally is—“

“—it could hardly compare to your… motivations shall we call them?” Loki gave Tony the kind of smile that made normal people shiver with its chill. Tony didn’t budge, but there was something in his eyes that met Loki on even footing. That didn’t stop Loki, though. “Your armor is not just for war, Tony Stark, and it keeps out more than just your foes.”

“Says the alien who wears enough layers of leather and metal to outfit a biker bar.” Tony’s expression hadn’t changed, not one bit. The two of them were beginning to make Jane very tense. “Tell me that’s not centuries of repression.”

“Can you both grow up?” Jane glared between them. “If I wanted to hear children I’d actually go home for Thanksgiving with my family. But if you want to keep on, Bruce and I can go anywhere else and run sims and not have to listen to either one of you.”

“No, we wouldn’t want to make Dr. Banner angry, would we?” Loki turned his smile on Bruce now, who tried to meet his gaze and looked away after just a few moments. “He’s already destroyed one laboratory on this ship. If we keep him around we may very well run out of spaces to work.”

“Didn’t think you’d stoop to the obvious jabs,” Tony cut in, his tone conversational. “Aren’t you above all that?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, trust me.” Bruce looked a little uneasy, but Jane relaxed a bit after she’d studied him for a minute. If he said he was okay, then she’d trust him.

“It must be exhausting, keeping the monster in check.” Loki’s voice became softer as he leaned forward, knuckles on the lab bench. “Do you not ever long to let it out and simply rest?”

“And what would you know about monsters, Your Highness?”

“More than you would.”

Bruce might have been able to take it, and Tony would dish it back out, but Jane felt her headache intensifying and decided she didn’t have to take any of it anymore. With an exasperated noise she packed her work onto one of the tablets, glaring round at Loki and Tony as she did so.

“If you two want to keep on arguing, fine, go on,” she half-shouted at them. “I can’t hear myself
think over the noise you’re making, so I’m going to go find somewhere quiet to work.” She turned to Bruce, who backed away – her expression must have been more threatening than inviting, because he looked slightly alarmed. “You’re welcome to come,” she told him anyway. “We might actually get work done.”

She made what she hoped was the most dignified, pointed exit she could, and smiled when she heard Bruce’s footsteps shuffling after her down the hall.

*

Tony watched first Jane, then Bruce, leave. When they were out of earshot, he rounded on Loki one last time.

“You don’t get to pass judgment here, Loki,” he growled, voice low and tense. “Not on them, not on me, not on anyone. I get that you’re a king, and you’re used to people jumping when you say jump, but we’re not your subjects. And we’re not going to let you push our buttons.”

Loki let his eyes harden. “So the hero steps in to defend his friends,” he sneered. “Do you enjoy playing at self-sacrifice, Tony Stark? Do you think you fool anyone?”

Tony’s jaw worked a moment as they stared each other down… and then he smirked. “Not like you’ve managed to,” he said, and left.

Loki stared at the door; he could hear Tony jesting as he caught up with Jane and Bruce, and allowed himself a grim smile. It was all in motion now, he thought. It would have to gather enough momentum when the time came, or all would fail.

*

Natasha had come to the Command Deck after having Medical look at the bruises she’d sustained earlier. Talking it out with Sif – well, talking about their feelings wasn’t a strong point for either one of them, so Natasha had suggested another bout and Sif apparently had still been very frustrated. Some of the blows had hurt, and Natasha had to keep herself in top shape. She really didn’t want broken limbs right now.

“Director,” she greeted, walking over to where Fury and Hill were talking quietly by one of his console screens. Nervous IT techs hovered around the other set, checking them out to make sure they hadn’t been damaged by falling bodies or debris in the attack. They both looked up as she approached.

“Romanoff,” Fury replied. “I see you’ve been spending time with our guests again.”

“I’ve learned a few things about swords that I didn’t know before.” Natasha drew in a breath; it felt like a sort of betrayal, telling Fury what Sif had said to her. But she couldn’t in good conscience ignore it either, no matter if it felt like she was breaking Sif’s trust… or being led to the information. “And I’ve learned a few things about our guests. About one, in particular.”

“Let me guess. Loki?”

She nodded curtly. “The queen had concerns he may be… compromised by the Tesseract.”

Fury’s brows drew together. “Compromised how?”

“She thinks it may be influencing his thoughts and actions.” Natasha paused a moment, thinking about how to phrase her thoughts. She didn’t know what to believe, if she was honest with herself, it
was all so far beyond what she knew and what she’d been trained for so long ago, but if this was their world now she’d adapt to it.

“They’ve all said it can… think, right? That it’s got a will? Queen Sif believes that it wants Loki to take it to Surtur.”

“It’s mind-controlling him?”

“That’d explain why the Drs. Foster and Banner are now on one of the observation decks with their work,” Clint said from behind her. They all turned to face him.

“Why aren’t you with them?”

“It’s very close in there.” Clint made a face, and added, “And Stark is with them too. He hacked the door controls so I couldn’t get in unless I put in a melodic keycode based on some AC/DC song he likes. I don’t know any AC/DC songs, sir, otherwise I’d be with them. Anyway, I don’t think he locked everything up for me, you know?”

“Loki.” Fury ran a hand over his head. “Where is he now?”

“Back in his room. I escorted him there myself and keyed the door to ping your console if he leaves.”

“Can’t trust the bastard not to figure out that you’ve done that and disable it. Alien or not, he’s too smart for us not to keep it on the table.” Fury crossed his arms, chin in his palm. “I’ll set the security cameras to do a face trace on him, make sure he’s not sneaking around, record his movements if he gets out. Good work, both of you.”

The techs murmured their all-clears and Fury nodded in thanks, and directed them over to Hill’s consoles. “Barton,” he said, “Find Coulson and get him to talk to Stark, or Dr. Foster if Stark still won’t listen. I don’t want Tesseract data running around this ship unsupervised.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Romanoff, stick with Her Majesty as much as you can.”

“You think she’s compromised too?” If Fury thought Sif was under the Tesseract’s influence too, it would explain why Natasha felt so… pigeonholed wasn’t the right word, but it was the same feeling.

“I think she’ll be a problem if we have to move against her husband. Tell Thor to talk to his little brother. And keep the Captain informed. Thor may choke if things get bad with Loki – those two have the goddamn oddest relationship on this planet - and Cap’s the only other one on this boat who can match an Asgardian’s strength without destroying everything in the process.”

“Understood, sir.”

Hill waited until both Natasha and Clint had left before speaking up herself. “Director… what if Loki goes for the Tesseract?”

“We stop him. They stop him.”

Fury’s obsession with the supposedly-scraped Avengers Initiative had been a point of contention between the two of them since Hill had come on and risen to her position. Sometimes she did wonder why Fury had promoted her in the first place, knowing how she thought. “What if they can’t? What if this Surtur gets the Tesseract and Loki’s on his side? These people can barely work together as it is.”
Fury studied her for a long time before his gaze became just a little less hard. “When the time comes, Hill,” he said, “When we need them the most, they’ll be ready.”

“That doesn’t sound very certain,” she muttered. The council had ordered the Initiative scrapped for a reason, and Maria had gotten a look at the profiles of the people Fury wanted on this team, had interacted with them now. Stark was an insufferable playboy, Rogers was having trouble adapting to the world he’d woken up to, Thor was an alien with a mass of family complexes, Banner was a lab experiment gone awry...

“It doesn’t have to sound certain.” Fury leaned on his console. “I know you don’t agree with me on this, Hill, but you don’t have to. I know you don’t like my policies or the way I operate, but that’s not your call. You can tell the Security Council whatever you like and I know you aren’t giving me glowing reviews to them, but in this kind of business, absolute, by-the-book certainty doesn’t get you a damn thing. Except maybe dead.”

“It’s still a risk—“

“But it’s one I’m willing to take.” Fury gave her a look, and Hill swore that though his mouth barely twitched up, he was smiling at her. “You can’t play it safe all the time and expect to win. Sometimes you have to play dirty.”

“Is that what you’re doing, sir?” Maria asked stiffly.

Fury turned away from her, tapping a few things on his console. “I’m doing what I have to do to make sure this planet stays safe,” he answered. “And I never said it was going to be easy, or that you or anyone else had to like it. Better hold on, Hill, because we’re gonna get a wild ride before this is all over.”

*

None of them had said very much after Jane had led the way to the forward observation deck. Tony had yelled at Clint through the door that they weren’t coming out and if he wanted in he could either figure out the melodic code (they had settled on a short clip from ‘Thunderstruck’ after a short discussion) or he could hack the controls, and Clint had gone away after that. Now they all sat in a circle on the cold metal floor, silently tapping away at the equations on their screens, analyzing simulation results, the three of them lost in thought. Tony had made and undone half a dozen modifications on a redesign of the Exotic Superaccelerated Particle detector, lips set in a thin line. Jane glanced at him every so often, concerned; she’d never seen Tony be anything but disaffected. Seeing him visibly annoyed wasn’t something she was used to, but she supposed it had to happen sometime, and if it was going to be over anyone, it would be Loki.

It didn’t make sense to her though. Nothing Loki had done the last day or so added up to how he’d acted even the day before, or in the few days she’d known him, or to the man Thor said he was. Sly, given to doing things that most people wouldn’t dream of... but he had honor of his own sort (different though it was), and he was loyal to those who were in his good graces or had done him a service. And he had been pleased to help them on this project, to put his knowledge to work in a new way, to twist ideas and learn Earth physics and devour everything he could get into on his own tablet in the down time between simulations.

So why was he now acting like they were all bugs?

Jane pushed a few equations around her screen but didn’t really pay attention to what she was doing. When her mind latched on to a problem – whether it was mathematical or otherwise – it was like
being swept up in a strong tide. The problem here was Loki and his strange behavior, and like the simulations and projections made in three-dimensional space, Jane began turning the information over in her mind, plucking at it.

The Loki who had made her storm out of the lab wasn’t the same man who had sat across from her on a quinjet headed out to the unknown, that much was certain. Whatever the myths said he was god of, sometimes Loki told the truth, and Jane felt reasonably confident that he hadn’t been lying at that point. The fact he’d said such things at all, she surmised, was proof of that.

Even beyond all sentimentality, she’d seen his face as they had worked, had been shoulder-to-shoulder with him over displays and the Tesseract and had learned more about magical theory and the Bifrost in five days than she had been able to cobble together in five years. Darcy liked to joke that Jane sometimes had problems reading people, but it didn’t take a genius to see that Loki enjoyed the attention he got when he showed off some bit of magic. From what Thor had told her, appreciation for his intelligence wasn’t exactly common on Asgard, but he had it here in spades. Why give it up?

“It makes no sense.”

She looked up, startled, then smiled a little. “Are you telepathic now too, Dr. Banner? I was just thinking that.”

“Because it’s confused you too, hasn’t it?” Tony asked. “Why Chuckles suddenly goes from helpful to hateful. It’s like his entire personality did an about-face. Doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe not his personality,” Jane murmured. “Maybe just his motivation. But even then, it doesn’t work out.”

“We’re only operating with half the information.” Tony pulled a crumpled bag of trail mix out of a pocket and tore it open. “The shitty half.”

“So we figure out the rest. I mean, that’s what we’ve been doing here anyway…” At Tony’s look of go on, Bruce took a breath and looked to Jane for a nod before continuing. “Uh… well, I’m not a psychologist, but when people experience some kind of traumatic event, it’s possible for them to undergo sudden changes in personality, mood, their ability to think and reason…” He smiled a little. “Speaking from experience here. And I don’t think aliens are immune.”

Tony offered him the bag of trail mix and Bruce dug around in it with two fingers, scooping some out and popping it into his mouth. Jane’s brows drew together.

“What kind of psychological trauma would he have had that wouldn’t have the whole ship hopping?”

Bruce was about to speak when the door pinged. Tony rolled his eyes and tapped a flashing button on his tablet. “Go away, Robin Hood.”

“It’s Agent Coulson. Open the door, Mr. Stark.”

Tony pressed his lips together. “Come on, Agent, you have to know a little AC/DC—“

“Let me rephrase my request.” Coulson didn’t raise his voice, but even Jane felt the whip-crack of his voice and sat up a little straighter. “Open the door or I will have the team of explosives experts behind me fill the room with enough nitrous oxide to anesthetize the three of you for hours, before blowing the door and dragging all three of you out onto the deck after we’ve risen above fifteen thousand feet.”
Tony, Bruce, and Jane exchanged looks, and Tony sighed at last and keyed in his deactivation code. A moment later the door slid open and Coulson, followed closely by Clint and Steve, came through.

“Oh, look,” Tony muttered. “He brought friends. I don’t think any of you were invited to this party, and we’re trying to work and we can’t with buzzkills around—”

“You’re working with sensitive SHIELD information,” Coulson said, apparently unfazed as the deck rumbled beneath them and the helicarrier began to rise out of the water. “Your security detail is for your own safety and to preserve the integrity of your work. Since Agent Barton is clearly not enough, I’ve brought along Captain Rogers as well.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Jane began, but Coulson smiled at her in that mild, unamused way of his and she quieted too.

“We’re just trying to make sure that nothing untoward happens to any of you,” he said. “Your work is too valuable to us to risk that. This not a request, Mr. Stark,” Coulson told them, holding up a hand when Tony opened his mouth to protest. “This is an order from Director Fury.”

He left – accompanied by the ominous sound of booted feet on deck flooring – but Clint and Steve took benches and sat down, getting comfortable. The three scientists exchanged another look, but knowing that they had to finish what they were working on soon – more than ever, if Loki was off the deep end now – they bent their heads back over their tablets.

* * *

Sif missed Asgard’s sky.

It was a strange thing to pine after, she thought, but it made sense. Asgard at night was not only lit by thousands of lanterns and candles and the enchanted glow of the palace itself, the old spells that granted light. Its sky was never truly dark, for Asgard nestled near the crown of Yggdrasil’s branches, and the whole sky was light and golden with her many paths.

By contrast Midgard’s sky was dark, the stars dim reminders of the fact they belonged to a much greater universe. It dragged at Sif, though. She could not even take solace in Yggdrasil’s ever-present, comforting light.

Something in the air of the flight deck shifted; looking at her hands resting on top of one of the plastic barriers cordoning off the area around the access hatch, Sif curled them into fists.

“Will it not ruin you to be seen here?” she asked the air, the only indication of another presence the sharpness of frost and the fragrance of leather.

“Then I must avoid being seen.” Loki’s footsteps were quiet, and a spot between Sif’s shoulder blades itched with the weight of his gaze. She stared straight ahead, mind whirling.

“Is there no other way?” she asked at last, softly. Behind her, she heard her husband draw in a breath.

“There is no other way.”

“Then be about it.”

She still did not turn when he stepped up behind her and put a hand on one of her clenched fists. Just for a moment, to feel the cool presence of it, to let her see their hands thus, and then he was gone.

Sif stayed there, frozen and still as a statue, until his footsteps were gone.
As before, the corridors in the Helicarrier were mostly deserted. Those Loki encountered on his way to the Tesseract lab stepped aside with alacrity, averting their eyes and remaining silent. Nobody questioned him. Nobody dared.

Loki could not deny to himself that it felt good to see them so apprehensive around him. It was not just the Tesseract’s influence, either, for he had long since realized that all the Tesseract did was amplify that which was already present. No, it was the part of himself that simply could not function wholly on the same path as Thor or Odin or anyone else who did what was right and good as a matter of course. Loki was not meant for that golden, sunlit path. Loki was meant to walk darker ways.

As he passed the dark hemispheres of cameras or the little boxes with black windows, he made sure to look straight into each one. Doubtless Fury had someone tracking his movements through the Helicarrier (or at this point was doing it himself), the man was no fool, and right now Loki was certainly making no attempt to sneak about. The only reason there were no armored and masked guards around him was likely because he simply could not have dispatched them soon enough to arrive here.

Well and so; Loki would be quick about this particular bit of business anyway. He had other matters to attend to.

There were workers clearing debris and repairing countertops and electronics in the workroom outside the Tesseract lab, and as Loki approached they all paused, looking up at him. “I need privacy,” he said, putting command in his voice. “You have one minute.”

There was the barest moment of hesitation before they started moving, but move they did, nobody wanting to question or anger the alien king, all averting their eyes. All but one, and Loki could all but hear the man’s pulse speed up as he caught the full force of Loki’s glare. To his credit, the man - T. Marino by his nametag – did not flinch.

“We were assigned to this place and told we had to get it back up and running as soon as possible,” he said. “Are there new orders from Director Fury?”

“Not from Fury,” Loki replied, and smiled mirthlessly at the confusion on the man’s face. “From me.”

The spell was a simple one; the man would awaken in a day, memories intact and none the worse for wear, but he knew how it looked on a monitor. Image is everything, he thought, and stepped over T. Marino’s prone form on his way to the door at the back of the lab. Very deliberately he placed his thumb on the little square, let the optical reader scan his retina. Let there be a record of what he had done. Let them know and be unable to refute it.

Let them know what he was capable of.

* * *

Ever since the attack, the Command Center had been a hive of activity. It hadn’t suffered much in the way of damage, but consoles needed to be set back up and computers checked, and IT moved from row to row, checking everything over before giving them back to the people on shift. Most essential monitoring stations were operational again – his and Maria Hill’s consoles, security, navigation – and Fury’s earpiece crackled. “Sir? Got something you’re going to want to take a look at.”
He turned away from Coulson for a moment, tapping his fingers on one of his consoles to activate it. “Send it over.”

A window slid into view and Fury flicked his fingers over it. There were several linked videos, all camera feeds from various points in the ‘carrier, all showing Loki in his full armor walking purposefully through the halls. What unnerved Fury – what could probably unnerve anyone - was that as he approached the camera, Loki looked straight into each one, and smiled.

“Where is he now?”

“The Tesseract workroom, Director. Here’s the – holy shit!”

Fury maximized the window on another console just as Loki dropped the worker, and felt his whole body go cold. “Get a security team down there immediately! He’s going to take the cube!”

*

“Thor?”

He turned. Jane was dressed for sleep, though the sun was barely down; she’d been feeling tired lately, more fatigued than usual. She had been working hard, though, and for all that her body was not a warrior’s body, her mind more than made up for it. Thor crossed the room to where she sat cross-legged on their bed, her tablet at last set aside for the night.

“What is the matter, Jane?” The springs creaked when he sat, but the bed was sturdy and held as she curled her legs under her and leaned on him. She bit her lip in thought, her hands going to curl around one of his. Small they were, but strong in their grip.

It took her a few more moments to get the words out. “Thor, I’m worried about your brother.”

“Loki? Why?”

“He wasn’t acting like himself today. I know you say he can be moody, but this goes beyond that. This is… Thor, it was like he was a different person.”

Thor curled his fingers around Jane’s, brow furrowing. Loki was given to moods, it was true – he always had been, even when they were children. But this sounded more serious. “Different?”

“Before, he… he liked working with us. It was kinda right up his alley. But today all he did was antagonize us without any reason at all.”

“He would often do so to our friends,” Thor murmured. But he didn’t think it was Loki’s usual ways. Those were at least rooted in the pretense of friendly jibes with people who knew him well. But with people he wanted to impress, Loki was not usually thus, and wearing the mantle of kingship besides seemed to have bent him away slightly from pure antagonizing. “Perhaps he has spent too long with the Tesseract. Sif told me today she had… concerns.” And Thor knew Sif had nearly pushed herself to pull rank on him to keep him from tearing across the helicarrier to speak to Loki then and there.

“Well, Tony and Bruce and I do too, and with the way Agent Coulson and the others were acting today, I think the director has to.”

“Do they believe him a danger?”

“Isn’t he always?”
Thor made a face. “My brother is like you in many ways – you both hide your weapons until the rest of us cannot react,” he told her with a squeeze to her fingertips. “Loki is king and knows, I believe, the value of maintaining standards of diplomacy. But if he has been affected by the Tesseract – if he has been nudged down a stray path…”

“I think you should talk to him,” Jane said earnestly. “I think you need to. We think something happened to him within the last day or so, something bad enough to push him off-kilter. You’re his brother. He’ll at least give you the time of day.”

“Something happened?” Thor looked at her, things ticking over in his mind. The Tesseract and his brother, Jane saying he was acting strangely…

“We don’t know what, but—“

Alarms began to sound. Thor was out of bed and calling Mjolnir to his hand in an instant, his armor snapping back into place around his body. Jane was scrambling out of bed, making to pull on one of her overlarge sweaters, but Thor put a hand on her arm.

“If this is Loki’s doing, it may be beyond you,” he said. “Do not believe I think ill of you, Jane, or think you incapable, but he is my brother. Let me try to reason with him.”

Jane seemed about to protest for a moment, but sighed and pushed her hair out of her face. “Okay. Just… be careful?”

“You have my word.” He gave her a last smile as he pushed his way out into the corridor and started toward the lab section at a jog. If Loki was causing trouble anywhere, Thor thought, it’d be there.

He just hoped he was wrong.

*

Loki heard the alarm going off and smiled faintly. Fury was quick, but…

“Brother!”

…Asgardians were quicker.

Loki did not turn, simply glanced at Thor over his shoulder. “I was wondering when you’d be arriving,” he said. “Is there some problem, Thor?”

The tone of his voice clearly set Thor on edge, and that was by design; it was the same one that he had used in their fight. He could hear the creak of leather as Thor gripped Mjolnir.

“What are you about, Loki? Why did you hurt that man – what are you doing?”

“I have no need to explain myself to you.” He did turn now, and Thor stepped back when he saw that Loki had the Tesseract in his hand – or, well, hovering slightly above it, the cube turning slightly every time his fingertips brushed it. Even this made his skin itch, but it was preferable to burning.

“The Tesseract—“

“—is going where it belongs.” Thor did not step back as Loki stepped out of the Tesseract lab, comprehension dawning on his face. Loki pushed a little more. “It was never meant for the pathetic scrabbling of these humans, Thor, surely even a dunce like you realized that.”

“I thought—“
“That I enjoyed working with them? That I had found some kind of kindred souls in these mewling, squabbling children?” He laughed. “Don’t be a fool. I could never find parity with any human, much less that discordant lot.”

“So it was all a lie?”

“Thor,” Loki said patiently, condescendingly. “Have you not been paying attention since we were children? I have always been a liar.” For a moment he felt the façade slip, felt truth and pain come out when he did not want them to. “I have always been cast in that lot, and I always will be. If you think it bothers me, you are wrong. I have embraced it, made it my own.” Control, control – a breath, and Loki brought himself back. “And now I act on it.”

Thor was silent, watching him, and Loki could read every thought and emotion that his brother flicked through. Hurt, betrayal, and it did sting to see them. But Loki had made himself ice, and though there were cracks – never again could he truly be impenetrable, not after everything that had happened over the past months – it was the smooth face he showed now when Thor, his heart in his eyes, questioned him again.

“Did you mean none of it, Brother?” He asked quietly. “Any—anything you said to me, to our friends, did you lie to us all?”

The lie came easily. “Yes. Every word a lie, Thor.”

“And,” Thor’s voice was rough with tears, though he kept them unshed. “And when we fought, all that was said afterward, all your apologies for your actions—did you lie to me, Loki? Did you not mean any of it?”

He should have choked on the lie. Part of him did, tried to hold it back, but the pragmatist in Loki – the part that had known from the beginning that this was the only viable course of action, that this way was the only way - forced it through, though it made him sick to do it. “I meant none of it. How could I forgive you in a day for centuries of ill treatment?” He made his voice soft. “How could you believe that I would?”

Thor snarled and lunged for him, but Loki had been prepared, and the spell hit Thor squarely in the chest and propelled him up and back, punching a new hole in the corridor. Loki considered it for a moment, the edges of the metal charred from the lingering effects of the spell, and then turned away.

For a moment, his gaze lingered on one of the cameras in the room, a tiny light behind a tiny black hemisphere. Loki smirked, and gave the camera a mock salute.

And then he was gone.

*

The breeze was tropical, the night warm, but Sif felt cold standing on the upper flight deck of the Helicarrier. The alarm going off inside was faintly audible over the sound of wind and waves and machinery.

Sif drew in a breath. It was done, then. He had found no other way.

She stared out over the water, even when the hatch behind her opened and the tromping of many pairs of heavy boots came close.

“Your Majesty,” and it was Director Fury who spoke to her, “I’m gonna have to ask you to come with me.”
Sif turned to look at him. “Where?”

“Loki’s taken the Tesseract,” he replied, and as she looked at him Sif wondered at the wisdom in provoking the man. His gaze was no less intense for only having one eye, and she could read anger in every line of his body. “Until I’m sure you’re not conspiring with him, I’m going to have to confine you, make sure you’re not staying behind as a saboteur.”

“One would think that holding one innocent of wrongdoing accountable for the actions of another goes against your principles.” Sif tilted her chin up slightly; she was significantly more well-versed in these matters than she had been at the start of her marriage. “And I cannot but think that when one is courting new allies, one does not want to imprison their queen.”

“It’s also generally considered impolite to take other people’s things.” Fury met her eyes levelly. “I’m not locking you up, Your Majesty. Just making sure that you’re not staying here to wreak more havoc on Loki’s behalf.”

“Havoc is Loki’s domain, Director. I am War, not Mischief.”

“You’re still his wife, close to him. It’s just a precaution, not an accusation.”

They considered each other for a moment, and then Sif sighed, unstrapping her shield and glaive and holding them out. The agent who stepped forward to take them seemed surprised at their weight, and passed her shield off to a second agent. “Have a care for my things,” she instructed them. “I have carried them since I took my oaths as warrior, and if I find one nick that was not there before, I will have you both set to fixing it.”

The two agents paled, then nodded, and Sif turned her gaze back to Fury. “As you will, then,” she told him, and sounded every inch a queen. “Lead the way.”

*

He had been right.

Surtur was meeting with his generals when Loki suddenly appeared in their midst, a swirl of green fabric and gold armor. Everyone pulled back, surprised – then one attacked, lunging forward with a dagger that was long enough to almost be a short sword.

Loki flung a hand out toward the demon and it dropped, a tiny knife in its throat and the dying green flicker of a spell dissipating into the heated air. Another surged forward, then another. Both met the same end, though by different routes; one choked on thick black froth, and the other burst into green flames before collapsing into a pile of ash.

“Enough! Stop, you fools!”

They edged backward, still poised to attack but wary now of the seemingly insignificant ant that had taken three of their own and now had their lord’s attention. Loki, for his part, seemed perfectly cool, a faintly amused and mocking smile on his face as he considered the circle of demons and monsters around him.

“Eager, aren’t they?” he said. “Surprising that you would surround yourself with this lot, Surtur, Lord of Muspelheim.”

“Surprising that a king of Asgard would be here, though we thought you might come before long.” Surtur returned, leaning forward in his throne. “When your father was here before, boy, it ended badly for me.”
“I am not my father,” Loki replied, and there was some edge to that statement that Surtur could not parse. He ignored it – a second son was given to strange thoughts on that subject, naturally. Loki’s smile was back. “But I am king of Asgard, and I come bearing a kingly gift.”

He waved a hand, and the Tesseract appeared within his palm, bright blue and pulsing and throwing off curls of pale, wispy energy. A ripple of hissing exclamations spread out among the assemblage, and it was only their lord’s fiery glare that kept them back. Loki stood calm before the throne, the light casting hard shadows on his face and dancing in the metal of his armor.

“You betray your own realm and those you’ve been playing about with by bringing this to me,” Surtur rumbled after a moment of watching Loki, probing with his own magics to ensure this was not some trick or trap.

“My reputation is not precisely sterling.” Loki watched the Tesseract a moment, blue eyes seeming bluer in the light. “Let us simply say that I have found it more beneficial to take this course of action than to remain with a gaggle of squabbling children.”

“Harsh words for a group that includes your brother…” Surtur watched for a reaction, and when there was none, he curled his lips into a nastier smile. “…and your wife.”

Loki merely shrugged. “My brother throws his lot in with the mortals, fool that he is. But I do not come to speak of Thor.” He indicated the Tesseract. “I heard you might be seeking this, though your message at the humans’ earthbound base was quite clear enough. I must commend your ability to hide things even from the sight of Heimdall – your magic is truly magnificent.”

The smile faded into a scowl at Loki’s tone of voice. “Do not play the fool, Silvertongue. I know your reputation well, tarnished as it is – your tricks and your treachery.”

“Harsh words for one who comes bearing the very thing you desire.”

“I tire of this,” Surtur muttered, and even Loki straightened at the edge to the fire-lord’s voice. “What is it you want, Loki Lie-smith? Speak plainly.”

“Why, to give you what you want, of course. Provided I get what I want.”

“Lay out your terms, then.”

“I will let you crush Asgard – I may rule but it is only because my father sleeps and my brother gallivants about on Midgard, I have no love for it or its people.” Contempt made Loki’s upper lip curl. “But in return, you allow me to rule Midgard. I am a king, and I will have a throne… and the other option, a violently fiery death, is something I find I am not amenable to. You understand, surely.”

“You would rule a world of simple humans?”

“They are far easier to subjugate than Asgardians, and I could do with a bit more loyalty from my subjects.” Loki smirked. “When you have assured me of your victory and your good faith I will turn over the Tesseract to you, and allow you to overrun the rest of the Realms with its power. Naturally I shall rule Midgard at your pleasure, but I would hope you have seen the benefit of having those who bend the knee to you, be it willingly or out of fear.”

“I cannot think your wife will like this plan.”

“Oh, she will most certainly hate me for it. She will simply have to learn.”
“And if she does not?”

Something dark made its way into Loki’s smirk. “I shall persuade her.”

Surtur sat back in his throne, considering Loki for a long few minutes as the others around them rustled impatiently. Then, at last, he smiled. “I agree,” he said. With a wave of his hand, a servant rushed forward with a piece of blank parchment. Surtur touched a fingertip to it and words in an ancient tongue scrolled down it, their terms written out in indelible ink. Biting his thumb hard enough to draw blood, Surtur smeared some of his own across the seal at the bottom. The servant then held it out to Loki. “Swear your allegiance here.”

Loki stepped forward, reading over the words and nodding. “Asgardians honor their oaths, of course, and none more binding than a blood oath.” With a flourish the Tesseract vanished and a silver dagger appeared. Loki pricked his thumb and smeared his own blood across the seal as well, and did not let himself think of the last time he had sworn a blood oath.

“It is done.” The parchment rolled itself up and the servant tucked it into a scroll case. “Bring food and drink! We have an alliance to celebrate, we—” Surtur paused when Loki cleared his throat delicately.

“If I may, my lord Surtur…” When the demon waved a hand, Loki nodded, the very picture of deference. “Your forces – I walked among them before showing myself to you – are great and powerful, a fitting army for a—“

“Your point?”

“Ah – yes. They are strong, but it would not hurt to have insurance, my lord, and I can provide you allies if you intend to go against the might of Asgard. I have a debt to collect – give me leave to do so, and I will ensure it makes you unstoppable. Then of course I will return and partake of your generous table.”

“Very well. But be quick about it, Asgardian.” Surtur grinned toothily. “Feasts in the keep of the lord of fire tend to boil quickly.”

“I will go and return swiftly, my lord.” With a bow, Loki disappeared in a swirl of green smoke and a flash of light.

Surtur stared at the place he’d left and felt his grin widening. It seems the stories of your change of heart were all wrong, Loki Snaketongue, he thought. Nothing can change a heart as ill as yours. In the end, you will always fall.

* 

They all gathered around the glassy table. Everyone was silent, unable to look at each other. Thor and Jane had moved their chairs closer together, and Jane had her hand curled over Thor’s palm; Tony still slouched in his chair, but despite his furrowed brow he looked almost contemplative. The rest were some combination of drawn, tired, or tense. Fury stood at the table’s head.

Natasha flicked her fingers over the display in front of her, watching the feed from the containment cell. Sif had seated herself on the cot, still and proud as a queen carved from marble. The assassin glanced at Fury, before looking back at the video feed. It wasn’t her job to agree or disagree with Fury’s calls and she was no soldier to blindly follow orders, but it was difficult to believe this one was a good call.
Thor was more vocal about his displeasure. “Imprisoning Sif will give you none of the answers you seek,” he was saying. “Asgard will see this as an act of war, and that is a battle none of you are prepared to fight.”

Natasha wasn’t the only one looking at Thor out of the corner of her eye here, and others were less subtle. Sometimes it was easy to forget he was royalty the same as Loki or Sif, and that for all that he came off as kind of affably eccentric and slower, it was only in comparison to his brother. When Thor started to throw his weight around, it was difficult not to take notice.

“Loki took the cube,” Steve said, but it sounded like he was having difficulty with this as well. “With all due respect, though, Director, I can’t see the benefit in putting her in that…”

“Hulk tank,” Bruce supplied. His voice was soft but tense. “That’s what it is, right? A place to put me if I prove too volatile, if you think I’m losing control?”

“Only a precaution,” Fury replied.

“Like detaining innocent people,” Tony cut in. “That’s just a precaution too, isn’t it? Do you feel a little less paranoid now, Fury?”

“We don’t need this right now, Stark—“

“No, I think we do. Someone who knows what we’ve been up to is taking that cube to someone who wants to end us all, and you’re wasting time with this.” He pushed away from the table. “If you want to sit here and talk about it, great, but I’m going to go do something about it.”

He left the room, and this time there was no flair, no drama, just a man. After a moment, Steve got up and went after him, and one by one, so did the rest of them.

Fury watched them leave out of the corners of his eye, head still bowed. When they were alone on the table’s dais, Coulson uncrossed his arms and came over, leaning on his palms on the table.

“Do you think it’ll be enough?” he asked quietly.

Fury sighed, running a hand over his head. “We’ve gotta hope it will be. Otherwise I’ve just alienated our entire team.”

Coulson’s lips were pressed together in that thin smile of his, but his brow was furrowed deeply. That worried Fury more than anything. “I’m sure it’ll work, sir.”

But try as he might, Fury couldn’t shake Coulson’s worried face out of his mind.

* 

“Hey. You okay in there, Your Majesty?”

Sif paused – she’d been running through her hand-to-hand training again, both what she’d learned on the sands of the training yards and what Natasha had shown her – and lowered her arms, looking over at Steve. He stood just on the other side of the glass, feet planted in the way of a confident warrior.

“I have been provided food and drink, and while it is not the palace of Asgard, it is hardly the least comfortable place I have slept,” she replied. “Your concern is appreciated.”

Steve let his arms uncross and fall. “None of us are happy with Fury doing this,” he told her. “It’s not
“I understand his reasoning, if it eases your mind.” Sif came over to stand just on the other side of the glass. “Though I dislike being confined at all. The glass walls do nothing to help, either.”

He smiled a little at that. “I admit to not knowing you beyond what your file says, Your Majesty, but I don’t think you have anything to do with your husband taking the Tesseract.” And Sif was glad he went right on past that, because if he’d stopped there she wasn’t sure she could keep everything off her face. “Whatever the director thinks, we’re going to need someone with a head for war like you have, and you can’t really direct a battle from in here.”

“I have heard you have distinguished yourself in battle as well.”

“Small teams. Recon and quick strikes. I don’t have the experience to lead a whole army, or to fight against one.”

Sif gave him a little smile. “I think you may soon get your chance. There is going to be a battle soon, Captain, and it will be a glorious one.”

“Then we’d best get you out of there quickly.” He paused. “If you don’t mind my asking, ma’am… why do you suppose Loki did it? Why would he turn around now and take the Tesseract?”

Sif nearly felt herself freeze up. She had told Loki that spinning tales was far more his arena than her own, but... “The Tesseract touched him in some way. Perhaps he believed he had to, but I could not tell you truly. Even to me, Loki is a mystery.”

She held her breath until Steve nodded in acknowledgement. “That thing should never have been put in our hands, or anyone’s,” he said, and his voice had an odd quality to it that made Sif curious. “It’s been nothing but trouble since then.”

“There are things in the Realms that should never come to light.”

“I’m with you there.” Steve took a step back. “We’ll get you out, Your Majesty—“

“Sif.”

Steve paused, then smiled. “Sif.”

She watched him go, and closed her eyes, forcing her muscles to relax one by one. That had been close, and she felt ill deceiving such a good man – such a good group of people – but the alternative was far worse.

As soon as Loki walked out of shadow and into the cold blue light filtering into the circle of pillars that made the throne room of the king of Jotunheim, the Jotunn around the throne lowered their spears of ice and stopped him, twenty paces from the foot of Laufey’s throne.

“This is beginning to be a disconcerting trend today,” Loki muttered half to himself, but his eyes were on Laufey.

“The changeling king comes alone this time,” Laufey said. “Too cold for the hot Asgardian blood of your queen?”

“My business here is private.” Loki glanced round at the giants still holding their spears trained on him. “Very private.”
“You may feel confident enough to come here without guards. Jotuns are somewhat more circumspect, given that whenever Asgardians come to our realm, we tend to suffer in some way.”

“I thought our last visit quite pleasant.” Loki waved a hand and a silver knife appeared in it. He rolled his eyes as the Jotuns around him shifted closer, and laid the edge of the knife on his palm. “But my business is that of kings, and unfit for the ears of lesser beings.” As he spoke he drew the blade across his skin, letting his blood drip. It froze before it hit the ground. “I come under the old rules of diplomacy. Let my blood serve as proof.”

Laufey considered him a long moment, then sat back on his throne, waving a hand. The other frost giants melted away into the snowy darkness. Loki threw a spell to ensure they were truly gone, then turned his attention back to Laufey.

“Tell me why you are here, and make it quick and interesting.” Laufey’s red eyes seemed to glow in the dim blue light. “I would be within my rights to call your death an accident.”

“My death would not suit you, not when what I will offer you and the realm of Jotunheim is far more valuable.” Loki began to talk quickly, keeping his cadence swift to make sure that Laufey did not shift his attention. It worked, particularly when Loki got to his own offer.

“You will do what?”

Loki smiled thinly. “I will abdicate my claim to the throne of Jotunheim,” he repeated.

“You are the only blood heir…”

“So name another. Surely you have that practice here in this… place?”

“Do not think us barbaric.” Laufey ran a hand over his chin, watching Loki carefully. Loki had been certain for a time that Laufey had been planning to keep the knowledge of his true parentage a secret until some opportune moment – well, opportune for Laufey, not so much for Loki, and that was something he could not leave dangling. “In exchange for our aid, you will abdicate your right to be acknowledged as Crown Prince of Jotunheim should you choose. Are matters truly that desperate?”

“It is Surtur,” Loki replied simply. That was enough for Laufey, apparently, for he nodded.

“You offer a precious thing. Why?”

“I do not want to be king of Jotunheim. As you can imagine, I am rather comfortable where I am.” Loki shrugged. “If you want one raised in Asgard to have a claim to your throne…”

Laufey pressed his lips together. “I accept your offer. No Asgardian, born or nurtured, will sit on the throne of Jotunheim.”

Loki conjured the knife again, a smile beginning to curl across his lips. A crucial part of his plan had been accomplished. All that was left was to remain undiscovered until it was time. “Shall we swear it?”

*

The sound of the door sliding open woke Sif from restless sleep, and she sat up to see a group of people clustered around the controls to her strange prison. The walkway up to the door was crowded as well – she could see Thor, towering over everyone else, and the Captain, and she could hear Tony in a heated argument with someone.
Natasha was closest to the door, and gestured with a hand. “We’re releasing you,” she said matter-of-factly over the din.

“Did you convince Director Fury that I was not involved?” Sif asked as she walked through the door, boots clanging heavily on the metal grate. Natasha smiled a little mysteriously.

“There was a collective effort to impress your innocence upon him,” she replied.

Now that she was out, everyone’s attention turned to her. Tony even left off whatever he was doing to stand in the half-circle of six people, all grinning at her. Even Clint, who had been almost as dour as Hogun since she had met him, was cracking a smile. For a moment, her heartsickness and her worries were forgotten, and she smiled unreservedly.

“I owe all of you a great debt,” she said. “Know that you can ask anything of me and if it is within my power as queen of Asgard to grant, I shall move the realms themselves to do so.”

“We don’t need any oath like that,” Steve said gently. “Just wanted to right a wrong done to you, Your Majesty. You don’t belong in there, and there’s a war to prepare for.”

“If you plan to return to Asgard to make preparations, Jane and I intend to accompany you,” Thor told her.

“And don’t think you’re getting away with leaving in a rush again,” Tony said. “You’re gonna have some guests. Someone’s gotta field test the ESP detector.”

“Are you really going to call it that?”

Tony raised his eyebrows at Bruce. “Banner, you’re a genius. What do you think?”

“I cannot ask you to leave your home undefended,” Sif began, but the looks from all of them made her pause.

“We talked about it.” Clint said at last. “Thor, Natasha, and myself are gonna go with you. Tony, Cap, and Banner are staying here. We’re not leaving Earth without some protection.”

“Are you—

“We have discussed it at length, Sif.” Thor’s voice was soft but firm, and for a moment he sounded so like the Allfather that Sif shut her mouth immediately before remembering that she technically outranked him. “My friends want to do this.”

“If they do this, then they are my friends as well.” She took a breath. “Then let it be so. Your aid will be much appreciated.”

Her weapons were handed back to her in the corridor, and as they made their way to the flight deck they were joined by two more people. Darcy was one, of course, where Jane went she followed with a cup of hot coffee and her own astute observations; the other was a SHIELD agent in the ubiquitous navy blue jumpsuit most people on the helicarrier wore. She gave her name, a little shyly, as Sofia d’Maria from Linguistics. Sif recognized her as the woman who had helped her in the dining hall.

“I’m sorry for imposing upon you,” she said as they walked down the short hallway leading out to the deck. “But I’m being sent on behalf of SHIELD. And I want to learn.”

“Do you understand that the fighting may make its way to Asgard, should I fail in its defense elsewhere?”
“I’m a SHIELD agent, Your Majesty,” Sofia replied. “I’ve got my gun, anyway.”

It was possible Fury was sending her along as a plant, but if that were the case Sofia was an exceptionally talented actress to keep her flustered appearance going so smoothly. “Then you are welcome.”

They emerged onto the deck and the bright morning sunlight. Fury, Coulson and Hill were there waiting for them. Fury looked like he hadn’t slept at all; his one eye was narrowed more than usual. Sif slowed her pace just barely, heading for the large clear spot over the SHIELD logo. “Director.”

“There is no need to想必 an audience. You are welcome.”

Heimdall rumbled as she strode past his pedestal to their horses waiting outside. “Surtur’s army is hidden from me, but scouts report movement on the moon Storslette.”

“Heimdall has nine. Don’t you read dossiers? I read them and I don’t even have to.”

Natasha was only a little paler than usual as they all mounted their horses (Jane and Thor rode together again, and Clint had Darcy clinging to him awkwardly around his quiver of arrows and his bow, though they both looked slightly green yet). “He’s your brother?”

“Half,” Sif replied. “We share one of his mothers.”

“He has more than one?” Clint muttered. Darcy poked him in the ribs.

“This place is already really bizarre.”

The heat was part of it. Muspelheim was hotter than the fires of Midsummer, and even before he had known of his heritage, Loki had loathed the heat. The air here reeked of brimstone and scorched earth, even within Surtur’s keep, and though he had set a spell to keep bleeding off heat it worked slowly. Sweat trickled down his back under his armor, making him feel disgusting and cross.
As if there weren’t enough reason to feel those things already. When he’d rejoined the feast, laughing and jesting with the rabble that Surtur surrounded himself with as though he were truly on their side rather than his own, he had borne the weight of their stares. None were more weighty than Surtur’s of course, but Loki had been nettled, and if it had been any other situation he would certainly have left long before things began to wind down. It had only been when the guests had begun filtering away to make their preparations and the horns of the army had begun to sound muster that Loki had made his departure, and it had been then that he realized that when he was not alone at these kinds of things, they were much easier to navigate.

It wasn’t just that he could use the excuse of I must attend my queen to get away from an overly pushy cluster of nobles, or that with a glance and a gesture he would at least not have to face them alone. It was that simply the knowledge of never having to be alone was something of a balm to easily frayed nerves.

It made no sense to Loki, for he had ever been able to acquit himself just fine before, and in truth he had not had any problems tonight either. But he had been tense, all too aware that there was no escape and no respite, and thinking on it had only made him irritable. That wasn’t the whole of it, but as his pacing brought him over to the window (an oval opening that may once have been the mouth of a lava tube), even thoughts of Sif left his mind.

Surtur’s army stretched out over the lava flats around the keep, and for as far as he could see torches were lit to see in the choking volcanic haze, and the shouts of commanders drifted up to him. For a moment, a heart-stopping moment, Loki wondered if perhaps he had misjudged things. Asgard’s armies were great – the Einherjar well-trained, and even the levies that Sif would raise were skilled, as any who lived in the greater Asgardian empire would be – but demons and fire giants and darker things swarmed around the keep, all making their way slowly toward departure points.

It took a moment, but Loki wrested his thoughts back under control. The size and skill of armies was not the only factor at play here, and all the pieces were in place for his plan to succeed. It had to succeed. There was no other option.

Still, as flashes of red light began to appear on the plains, portals opening to take Surtur’s forces to Storslette, he could not help but feel doubt gnawing at him. So much hinged on so little, this his biggest game yet, with the highest stakes. He would have to be its equal.

*  

The bustle in the palace hadn’t stopped, but after a string of meetings with her general and a hurried dinner eaten on the run, Sif had excused herself from the table and taken herself into Gladsheim. She did not miss the fact that not three days ago, she and Loki had been together in this same place, and suppressed a shiver at the memory. Loki looking up at her over the hiked-up folds of her skirts, face flushed with exertion, and her hands smoothing up the long curved horns of his helm…

“I thought I’d find you back in the war room.”

Sif collected herself and turned to face Natasha. The other woman looked slightly out of place in Gladsheim. She had not changed into any Asgardian gear, though she and Sif had chosen the best available from one of the armories, and in her black skintight suit, with her strange Midgardian weapons at her thighs, Natasha looked as alien as Sif felt on Midgard.

“They can manage without me for a time,” she said. “The levies will all be in tomorrow morning. We outfit them as they arrive, and then make for Storslette. As much as I wish I could greet every
arrival myself, it is simply impractical. I will ride among them when we depart, to give them heart, but…” she trailed off, shrugging at last when no more words would come. “What think you of Asgard?”

“It’s… nothing like I could have ever imagined. I mean, gods live here,” Natasha answered after a moment, heels clicking on the polished floor as she walked over slowly. “It’s beautiful, and terrifying. I can see how it would raise men like Thor and Loki, and women like you.”

“Asgard is my home.” Sif looked past Natasha to where the city was visible between golden columns, towers of bronze and glass rising to meet Yggdrasil’s branches. “For all its shortcomings, I cannot think of any other place I want to call home.”

“Is that why you want to protect it so badly? Because it’s home?”

“Would you not want to do the same?” They walked over to the steps that rose to either side of the aisle and sat. “Do you have no home you would die to protect?”

“Earth.” Natasha shrugged, elbows on her knees. “I left where I was born a long time ago. I don’t owe that place anything. SHIELD’s the closest thing I have to a family, and Earth’s my home.” She was quiet for a moment. “It must have hit pretty hard, Loki’s betrayal.”

Sif pressed her lips together, looking away. She could not meet Natasha’s eyes right now. “It was unexpected.”

“Yeah, it was.” Natasha was silent again, but this time there was a pregnancy to it, and Sif could still feel the other woman’s eyes on her. “The doctors and Tony couldn’t figure it out, either. We talked a little about it, before we went to spring you.”

“You have all only spent a few days with him – Thor and I have spent hundreds of years with him.”

“True. Still – you’re a warrior, you know to trust your instincts, just like me. And my instincts told me I was being led on, so I followed them, and I figured something out.” She stood up. “You’re covering for Loki.”

“That’s…”

“I’m not going to ask why. Others might not see it, but I’ve been trained to see the details. Though in my professional opinion, if anyone else misses it, they may be a little blind. So my question is this.” Natasha crossed her arms, fixing Sif with an intense stare. “What are you covering up for him?”

She tried – she did – but lying had never been Sif’s strong suit. It all came down, and as it did she sighed, getting up and heading toward the war room.

Natasha looked confused. “Where are you going?”

Sif looked over her shoulder as she walked. “If I am to break a promise to my husband,” she said, “I will not be repeating myself. I ought to have heeded my own instincts from the beginning in this, but…” she trailed off. “We do what we must to protect what we love.”

The Widow fell into step beside her as they left the room. “Is it worth it, Sif? Is Asgard worth it?”

Sif looked out through the columns, at the spires and the mountains and the stars beyond, and smiled. “It is worth it, Natasha Romanoff. Asgard is worth my last breath, and I would give it gladly if it meant she stood for a day longer. I am its queen, and its defender, and more than being my duty, it is my desire. Do you see now?”
Natasha was silent for a long time as they walked toward the heart of the palace, and when she spoke again, Sif didn’t have to look over to hear the small smile in her voice.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“Good,” Sif quickened her pace. Her heart was still heavy, for no familiar shadow followed her steps, but for the moment she felt as light as she had in days. “Let’s start a war.”
Fission

Chapter Notes

The penultimate chapter, and it's a long one! Settle in and I hope you enjoy!

*fission*; In nuclear physics and nuclear chemistry, nuclear fission is either a nuclear reaction or a radioactive decay process in which the nucleus of an atom splits into smaller parts (lighter nuclei), often producing free neutrons and photons (in the form of gamma rays), and releasing a very large amount of energy; in biology, fission is the subdivision of a cell (or body, population, or species) into two or more parts and the regeneration of those parts into separate cells (bodies, populations, or species).

With a yell, Sif thrust her glaive forward and up, under the rib cage of a fire giant to pierce the brute’s heart. It died on her blade, hot blood spraying over her and pattering against her armor and the silver metal of her helm. Gritting her teeth, Sif yanked her blade out and let the giant’s body drop before her, one more in the ring of foes that had fallen to her on this long, bloody day.

None rushed forward to take its place, though, and so Sif took a moment to breathe, to look around her. Mounted soldiers led a charge into a thick group of demons, their horses snorting and plunging; she watched some of them get knocked to the ground, trampled or stabbed or dying slow deaths. Not far off, others were engaged in their own personal bouts, weapons flashing in the dust-choked light. Overhead, the faint sound of fabric snapping in the wind signaled Thor flying over the battlefield, directing his lightning into the mounts of airborne fire giants and making them plummet to the ground. Arrows fired by Clint and other archers, ensconced in the rocks behind, whizzed by her. All was chaos.

The field stretched out before her, rolling grassy knolls churned to mud beneath hooves and boots and clawed feet. Stretching out to the treeline, miles distant, the battle was joined with sword and sorcery and the might of man and Asgardian and elf and dwarf. All had come together here, where it mattered most.

Sif had eyes for only one place, though. Behind the line of Surtur’s army, two figures stood side-by-side. She could make out the Lord of Fire himself – huge and shimmering with heat and flame, Surtur towered over all around him. The other was too small at this distance, but she knew who it was as well as she knew her own reflection.

Something hit her shoulder hard and nearly knocked her over, and with a snarl Sif whirled and swept out with her glaive, taking the leading fire giant in the stomach. It went down with a gravelly cry of pain, blood and viscera spilling between its fingers. Sif ran and flipped over it, bringing her glaive down in an arc to take the demon behind it and drove it back to the ground, used the added height to her advantage and leaped up to land a kick square on the face of another demon… and saw the oncoming swarm, eyes widening.

Thrusting her glaive into the air, Sif didn’t wait to see who of the Queen’s Regiment was left around her. “Rally! To me!” she cried, and heard answering calls from behind. “For Asgard! For Asgard!”

The cry was taken up as she set herself and met the line of attackers first, her glaive a silvery, whirling shield of destruction. As strong as her offense was, Sif could feel her muscles burning,
could feel grime stinging in all her wounds. Her breath came in pants between her teeth, lips curled into a grimace. Even the brief respite she’d gotten hadn’t been enough, and so the Goddess of War prayed for an end to the battle she had helped bring.

*Let it be over soon, she begged. Oh, Stars and Branches, let him end it.*

Sif was already awake by the time her handmaid came in and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“My lady,” she whispered, “You asked to be awakened an hour before dawn?”

Sif sat up, putting a smile on her face; her people took heart from her, she would not let her apprehension and her fears show on her face. “I did,” she replied. “Thank you. I will dress myself.”

“Very well, my lady. Shall I have breakfast sent up?”

“No, I will send for it later.”

The attendant left, and Sif leaned back against the gilt headboard of the bed. She had slept alone for weeks and it had felt too big then; now it felt as though it went on forever, with too many furs and pillows for just one. Here, alone, Sif could bring her knees up and rest her chin on them for a moment and look over at his bedside table, meticulously organized – three books, stacked according to size, a candle he didn’t need.

She remembered teasing him about it, too. How could he have anything so neat when his study was a festival of scrolls and messages and books piled up waiting to be replaced on the shelves, and the ozone scent of his magic over it all—

Sif put an end to that line of thought and rose from the bed, pulling off her shift and dressing quickly in the predawn chill. It was high summer yet, but in these dim hours, even the Realm Eternal was cool and still. Her training leathers warmed as she made her way down the palace to the training yards. The sands were mussed and kicked about, the grasses trampled from the thousands of feet that had passed through over the past two days. The barracks were overflowing, and Sif had ordered that all available quarters in the palace be opened. There were levies from one of the moons of Vanaheim just a few levels down from the royal quarters. The household staff had been appalled, but had not borne more than a few moments of Sif’s glare before relenting to her wishes.

In the center of one of the rings, she stopped, turning a slow circle. The palace’s fluted towers rose above her, the red-and-gold banners of the House of Odin flapping alongside Loki’s green-and-gold personal ones. Sif ground her teeth and launched into the first of her forms.

She had told all who asked that the king was making his own preparations for the oncoming battle and would join them on the field, but lying made her irritable, and she could not afford the distraction. Luckily, Thor’s presence, coupled with the four mortals, was enough to draw attention away. Most of the time.

Her glaive sliced through the air alone, but Sif imagined her foes around her, falling under her swirling blades. True dawn still lingered on the horizon, but the freshly-sharpened edges of her weapon caught Yggdrasil’s light and split it, as surely as if it were tangible. And as she moved, Sif let her thoughts become prayers – to let those who stood with her strike true, to protect the lives of those she commanded or to give them glorious, honorable ends that would surely send them to Valhalla.

She prayed until dawn touched the top of the palace and the noise of an army awakening began to filter down into the yard. By then she was drenched in sweat, hair sticking to her face and the back
of her neck, and only stopped on her way back into her bedchamber long enough to tell her handmaid she was ready for breakfast before going in to bathe.

In the steam her thoughts wandered from one place to another, flitting between topics and worries and hopes as she floated on her back in the water, hair fanned out around her head. The battle she faced would have the highest stakes – for Asgard, for its allies, for herself. So much rode on the back of so little that Sif felt as though any moment it all might crack and come tumbling down.

Not her; never her. She would be the pillar that stood before the breaking of the world. She had dreamed it, the night before – standing on a cliff, her army at her back and darkness before her and a light like Mother Yggdrasil coming off her blades. She hoped it was a good omen.

*Battle makes us all superstitious,* she thought with a thin smile, and rose from her bath.

The royal attendants had long since learned that Sif put on her own armor. It was a ritual, one she used to calm her mind and focus. Undertunic, leggings, boots; then her overtunic with its mail, and her armor over that, and last her collapsed glaive and her shield, bound together and strapped to her back. Her hair was last, bound back so it could be neatly tucked into her helm. By the time she finished, her nervous energy was gone, and her hands steady. At least, that was the idea.

There was a moment, though, when she paused at the door with her fingertips just resting upon it that Sif had to stop and collect herself. For a moment her chest constricted beneath her armor, her head spun with the enormity of what they were going to do. -Then she took a breath, squared her shoulders, and walked through the door. She was queen and warrior, and as long as she drew breath, Asgard would not fall.

* The Helicarrier had made its way up the coast after getting airborne again, and as they were passing Washington, D.C., on their way up to New York, Tony shut himself in the room he’d been given and dialed the one phone number he had memorized.

It rang twice before Pepper’s face materialized on the holographic screen. He recognized the view out the windows of the California office behind her. She looked tired. “Plant inspection not going so well?”

The tiredness was replaced by a patient look, a familiar expression on her face that was more than a little comforting to him. “The plant’s just fine, not that that’s what you’re calling about. Tony, what’s going on out there? The news has been going nuts with weird stories lately, none of it makes sense. I can’t help thinking you’re involved.”

“Why is it you always think *I’m* the one doing the weird things, Pepper?”

“Because you usually *are* the one doing the weird things?”

“When was the last time—“

“Stark Expo.”

“Oh.” Tony put on his best darn-you-got-me expression. “Yes. True. But that didn’t involve aliens.”

She leaned forward. “Tony, I really have been worried about you lately, so if you’re going to just mess with me—“

“I’m serious, Pepper.” Tony sat, leaning on his elbows at the desk. “Aliens. Good ones, bad ones,
smart-ass ones, ones with swords… it’s insane.”

“You’re serious.”

“Always the tone of surprise.”

“Not always.”

He was quiet, one hand pushing through his hair so it stood up on end. “It’s been… I don’t even know, Pep.” Tony’s voice quieted, and he couldn’t look at Pepper, though he could see her face softening out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t know what to think. We’re doing things that defy the laws of physics, and I can’t just call them magic because I know there’s some way to explain it all, but… I can’t see it.”

It stung to admit that, and he wouldn’t have to anyone but Pepper, or maybe Rhodey. Of course, at this point Rhodey probably already knew what was going on.

“And now we’re all on standby,” he said at last. “And that’s why I called you, because I don’t know when I’m going to be getting a chance to talk to you again, or if I will, or anything.”

“You’re staying there? With the Avengers—er, whatever you’re called, I don’t know if—“

It was Tony’s turn to break and give her a look. “Pepper, one of the first things I did was hack myself a secure line out. Fury’s a paranoid ass, I’m not going to let him eavesdrop.”

“I’m sure he’s just loved having you around.”

“He should.” Tony made a mental note to keep trying to find workarounds to make teleportation – the legitimate way, not however Loki cheated it – a reality. As great as it was to see Pepper’s face, if this fight was going to spill over onto Earth and he was going to have to fight aliens, he wanted to do more – to tell her somehow, with words he could never seem to find, how she kept him going every day.

“I don’t know what’s going on there,” Pepper said after a moment. “And I think it’s better that I don’t. That way, when you get back, you can tell me everything at once.”

“Everything is a lot, Pepper.”

“Then we’ll be talking for a while, I guess.” She smiled at him. “Be careful, Tony.”

“I’m always careful.” He smiled, just because he couldn’t really keep it from his face when she was too. “You know me,” he said.

“I do. Get back here soon.”

“I will.”

She ended the call, but Tony sat at the console for a moment longer, staring at the space on the display her face had been in, and wondering what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

* 

“This is how it stands.”

The war room was crowded. Between the generals and the commanders in the army that needed to be there, there were the four of Midgard and Thor, along with some others, lords and ladies who
wanted to say that they had put on their armor and stood with the throne against the fiery hordes. Most of them would not ride out when the army, but Sif paid them no mind. Her attention was on the table before them, the hastily-sketched map of the outpost moon spread out and held down by carved figures.

“Our scouts sent to Storslette say that Surtur’s army has been massing here since last night.” She indicated a broad valley between two mountain ranges. “They say that the strength of it is equal to our own. And with more coming in, soon it will surpass ours, and the odds – based solely on the numbers they are fielding, we all know that the Einherjar are worth far more than one of Surtur’s demons – will be twice or more our own.” A soft murmuring rippled through the courtiers. The commanders were silent; even the Midgardians did not flinch. “They have a regular pattern. Groups will use portals here and here—” she indicated two orange discs laid flat on the map “—with a pause between waves. We aim to time our own arrival to the moment a group begins to pass through the portals, when their confusion is greatest.”

She shifted along the edge of the table and people moved out of the way to make room as attendants placed markers representing Asgard’s forces. “Our first goal is to get to the portals and, ideally, shut them down entirely. We will settle for killing new arrivals.” She met Thor’s eyes across the table. “Thor, I give this task to you, at least at the start. You will be more mobile than the rest of the army, and can sow confusion from above to buy groups time to get there – Anundr, Hjalmar, you will be in command. Divide this task amongst yourselves. The stones that anchor the portals will need to be broken, as—” she faltered for a moment but recovered quickly “—as the king has his own tasks he is already about.”

“What about Surtur?” another commander asked. He was young – Sif remembered him now, Folkvardr, one of those newly-appointed after his superior fell in battle. He looked terrified, but before his queen his voice at least was steady. Sif gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I doubt you can take him on all by yourself,” she replied, and there was nervous shifting and laughter. “Surtur is my concern. I, and others here, have plans for him.” Gripping the edge of the table a little more tightly than before, Sif pushed on. “Clint Barton.” She waited until he’d pushed through the front ring of people before continuing, framing it slightly differently. “I’d like you to join a squad of our own archers. The field has scattered cover and many places you may make your nest.”

“What about Surtur?”

“Won’t your own people get a little touchy when a human’s put in their midst?”

“They will listen, or they will deal with their queen’s displeasure. I think seeing your skill in action will put to rest any lingering doubts.”

Professional or not, that made the edge of Clint’s mouth twitch up a little. “Appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“I believe in credit where credit is due.” Sif looked around the table again. “These are the special instructions I have for this battle – are there any questions? No? Then let us push on. We have a limited amount of time and many things to do.”

When the meeting was over and the commanders had gone to prepare those under them for departure, Sif touched Natasha’s arm to keep her behind a moment.

“I want you to ride with me,” she said quietly. “Beside me as my equal, which you are.”

The only sign Natasha was confused was a very faint shadow between her brows, but Sif was certain that underneath there was much more. “What? Why?”
“You could have remained silent before, but you did not, and there has been far too much secrecy of late. For all that you work in the shadows normally, I need someone I trust by my side,” Sif replied after a moment. “Thor will be on my right. You, I want on my left.”

“Sif… I’m not one of your soldiers,” Natasha said slowly. “I’m not in anyone’s army. I never wanted to be, and—“ she paused when Sif held up a hand. They were… friends, of a sort, despite only knowing each other a few days. But something was different about Sif right now.

“You mistake me,” Sif told her. “I am not asking you to ride with me as some sort of general, for that is not what you are. Any fool with eyes can tell as much, and in a way, you and my husband are not so different in the skills you chose, ways that do not necessarily lend themselves to the leading of others. I am asking you to ride with me as a friend, Natasha Romanoff, as a way to tell Surtur that for all his effort to tear the realms asunder, we stand together.”

It was a long moment they stood there, Natasha considering the offer and Sif waiting, her tension flickering across her face like a flame guttering in the wind. At last, though, Natasha smiled a little.

“When I was being trained,” she said slowly, “As a girl in Russia, I learned a lot about the psychology of a fight. It’s not just about strength of numbers or what weapons you have. Half the battle’s in your head. I’m not above using psychological warfare on a demon out of myth.”

Sif grinned, and Natasha almost smiled at how plain the relief on the queen’s face was. “Then I will have a horse readied for you when it is time to ride out,” she said. “I would offer you arms and armor from the very best of the Palace’s royal armories, but I doubt you would want them.”

Natasha snorted quietly as they walked out of the war room, the guards snapping to attention as Sif passed and falling into step behind the two of them. “Glad we know each other so well already, Your Majesty.”

“It only took you a few days’ acquaintance with me to realize that Loki and I were playing a ruse. I would think you know me very well indeed.”

“Well, if I can be honest…”

“I would prefer it if you were.”

“…you need to learn to play a little better, Your Majesty.” Though the strategy session had left Natasha with a sick feeling in her stomach, she made herself smile, made herself make it convincing, and didn’t let the irony be lost on her. “When this is all over, I’ll give you lessons. Just between friends.”

Sif grinned. “I look forward to it.”

*  

Privately, Loki compared this room to the war room in Asgard. There were more similarities than he’d anticipated, and he was yet trying to decide if that was something he was entirely comfortable with. Perhaps it simply spoke to the functionality of the room itself – there were only so many ways to arrange a room where a table bigger than most beds was the centerpiece – but the fact that the war room in Surtur’s fastness and the one in Asgard gave him the same feeling set his teeth on edge. Were he on a different path, Surtur could have been a valuable ally, or at least someone Loki could have used up and thrown away, but his plans did not call for either one. Surtur currently threatened things Loki wanted preserved, and offered a convenient solution.

All that still didn’t alleviate the irritation at both war rooms being dark places – the paneling in the
war room of Asgard was darker, the lighting slightly dimmer than that in most rooms in the palace, the table itself carved out of a mahogany so dark it was almost black. And while the lurid red glow of molten lava lit every room in Surtur’s keep (and made Loki sweat very unpleasantly under his gold armor), it was only lit around the edges here, the redness not crawling up the walls onto the ceiling as it did in other rooms.

But he could not devote too much of his time and thought to such things. Not when Surtur was giving him a sly look and asking, “What think you of the fact that your queen has fielded no armies yet, Snaketongue?”

He kept his displeasure at that particular moniker off his face, instead studying the conjured map of Storslette that encompassed Surtur’s staging area and the surrounding region for many miles around. “I cannot say it surprises me terribly. She has no reason to march until today, the appointed hour.”

“I would have thought she would be waiting for me.”

“My wife is a stubborn creature,” and that was not a lie at all, though the tone he spoke it in certainly was, “One with her own ideas about how a thing ought to be done. If you believe she must do one thing, she will do another just to spite you.” Loki gestured at the glowing red mass on the map. “But your army – with only those you have sent so far you outnumber Asgard’s forces two to one. Send the rest, and you will take the field through numbers alone.”

“You have so little confidence in the strength of your realm’s warriors?”

“I have confidence in the fact that we have not been to war, truly, since my father made his truce with Laufey. We play at war; we pretend we are still keen-edged as the day the Allfather ended the fighting. But the truth is that Asgard has stagnated, my lord Surtur, and that is something I cannot abide.” Loki flashed a very toothy smile, in imitation of Surtur’s own. “What use is a trickster like me when what I have to work with is rotten and crumbles in my hands? Better to rid the realms of it and start anew, yes?”

“Perhaps.” Surtur gave him a long, considering look, one Loki met with a raised eyebrow and a half-smirk, before he turned his attention back to matters at hand. “I have heard you are a master of strategy.”

“I suppose there’s no need for modesty here. I have actually made an effort to study and understand it, yes. But on this kind of field…” he paused, eyes flicking over the map – really looking at it, as much as he hated to. It had to be real, this much was to be as real as he could make it, and Surtur knew enough of strategy to be able to tell if he was being had.

It was just an analysis. He did what he had always done; he separated himself, made it impersonal and cold, wrapped up in the layers of indifference and disdain that had always kept everyone from getting too close.

“She will have roused as many allies as she can,” he said. “Not just Asgard and its levies from its outposts, but she’ll have called in the Vanir, and our allies among those of Alfheim. Nidavellr may rise – you did assault Kronar’s forge, and we rode to his aid, a fact that even the dwarves cannot forget. The Jotunn will side with you, of course—“

“Laufey’s people are weak,” Surtur grumbled. “I wish to burn Yggdrasil, not freeze it.”

“It will deal a psychological blow, then, to see an old enemy allied with a new one,” Loki replied smoothly. “In any case, my lord, the queen will have an army of all she can muster, and more may arrive on the battlefield as it continues. But they are fractured, disparate groups. Break the line, and
you will break them. Even among those who say they serve the greater good, alliances only extend as far as the first sign of loss.”

“What about these mortals you spent time with? You spoke little enough of them at table last night.”

“I spoke little of them because they mean little.” Loki had to tread carefully here, but he did it with ease, of course. “They are no threat to you. They squabble enough to put children to shame.” He looked at the three glowing blue marks on the map that signified his brother, the archer, and the Widow, and made a dismissal gesture with his hand. Two of the marks dissolved, leaving only the gold of Asgard behind, before that too dissolved. When he looked up at Surtur, his face was lit only by the green of the topography and the red of the army of Muspelheim.

“You have nothing to worry about, my lord.”

* *

When the Bifrost touched down on the deck of the helicarrier, Tony and Steve were there to meet the one who walked out of the swirling clouds, to take the message written on parchment out of the courier’s hands. Neither one of them really trusted Fury to do it, though they’d both insisted on doing it this way in order to make sure Fury didn’t take time away from preparing SHIELD’s resources for a potential invasion.

The message reiterated what the one last night had said. Like that one, this was in Natasha’s handwriting, and said that the plan was to keep Surtur on Storslette, but once things truly got underway there was no telling if the fighting would spill over onto their planet. Surtur wanted to see everything burn. There was no reason to think that wouldn’t include Earth.

Now the three of them stood around the big conference table on the command deck. The privacy walls had been raised, and the sound of the crew going about its business was muted now. Their last look at Fury had been a glare from his console as the screen rose up, but right now there were other things on their mind.

“They could come out anywhere,” Bruce was saying. “How are we supposed to fight them off if they come out in the middle of Russia?”

“That’s what you have me for.” Tony tapped buttons on the table screen before him and a holographic projection of the planet and its network of satellites rose out of the table. “I’ve got a program piggybacking on satellite monitoring systems all around the globe—“

“Is that legal?” Steve muttered. Tony just gave him a look, then continued on.

“—so we’ll know within a minute if there’s any kind of spooky disturbance anywhere in the world. I’ve calibrated it according to that thing that was letting the flying giants in the other day. We’ll know if anything remotely like that pops up, anywhere. I’ll go on ahead – I can get there faster than one of the quinjets – and you two follow my lead.”

Steve actually looked mildly impressed at that, though a sort of glazed look on his face as figures started crawling across the displays around the image of the globe. “How’d you do that?”

“Modified the code we’ve been using for the ESP detector.” Tony looked pleased with himself. Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“On the fly?”

“Okay, it’s quick and dirty and really, really rough, but it works, okay? Hopefully we won’t need it
for more than a day or two, because start introducing too much data and it might well all crumble.” The idea that it might do so and thus require fixing and tweaking brought a gleeful light to Tony’s eyes, for a moment erasing the lines of tension that were there and had been there since Loki had made off with the Tesseract. They were all quiet, though; Steve’s eyes were slightly red-rimmed, as though he hadn’t slept either, and Bruce looked tense.

“I still think you’ve given your magic detector the strangest name,” Steve said quietly, at last. That made Bruce snort and grin, and for a moment, the tension was gone. Tony made a face at them both.

“Well, I’ll put out a shoebox you can submit your ideas to.”

“Will you actually read them?”

“Probably not.”

A few laughs, but the tension was coming back as they all looked at that little piece of parchment again, watched the program running its calculations to try and keep track of any disturbances on the planet.

“Why do you think Loki did it?” Steve asked at last. “I mean, I read the myths, as a kid. I know he’s a trickster, a slippery guy you can’t really pin down to anything, but…”

“Just from working with him for a couple days,” Bruce replied quietly, “I think the only way we’ll really know why is if he decides to tell us.”

“And even then, we won’t know if he’s even telling the truth.” Tony ran his hands through his hair. “Some allies we’ve made, huh? A bunch of space alien Norse gods with giant fiery enemies that crash their parties.”

“The world’s changed more than I thought,” Steve sighed. “I just hope we can all keep up.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Just because you’re stuck seventy years ago doesn’t mean the rest of us are.”

They stared at each other for a moment, both looking away at the same moment. “Everyone just get ready to suit up,” Tony said at last, hitting the control for the privacy screen and walking toward the labs as it lowered. “I’m not facing angry aliens alone.”

* 

The courtyard was full again. Frigga wondered at how often she had come to stand at the balcony looking down into it to watch riders going out, to watch her son look after his wife as she rode out to meet Asgard’s enemies in battle. Even from here she had been able to see that though there was tension and nervousness on the faces of the officers, there was too often excitement as well, and shouts of anticipated glory.

This is never what we wanted, she thought sadly. We wanted to see our children grow up in a realm that no longer needed war. Somehow it always finds us.

Not that she would have counseled against going to war with Surtur; no, it was simply fear that choked her. The demon was old, as old as the Nine Realms themselves, and knowing that he had risen up again had brought chills to her. She had only heard stories from her father, and Odin had had a few tales from his father, but both of them knew those were secondhand at best. These – Frigga had to stop and tell herself they were not children anymore, that Sif had grown into a woman and was not the girl in fine dresses with scabs on her knees any more than her boys still slept in the same room – men and women were going out to face a threat that terrified those who had come
Yet the courtyard was not quiet, the noise not muted in the least. Others could call Asgard foolish for reveling in war so, and certainly they all strove for peace, but when battle came it could not be said that they did not greet it well.

Sif stood above the rest of them, watching as her officers issued orders, shouted across the courtyard to each other or checked their gear. Frigga knew her good-daughter was not as cool as she appeared, that it was only the training and Sif’s will that kept a tremor from her voice. She did come down hard on those who seemed more concerned about kill counts and competition than about the business at hand. In part it was a way to mitigate nerves, but there was a difference between that and recklessness, and Sif did not seem to tolerate the latter today.

“This is not another skirmish!” she would snap. “This is the future of Asgard and all other realms! This is not for sport, for a tale to spin at table!”

Frigga could not miss how sometimes Sif would angle her body slightly, would glance into empty space beside her where Loki usually was as though about to make some remark. She never slipped and started talking, but the way her eyes would flicker, enough for Frigga to see even at a distance. But she would simply keep going, to keep her mind from wandering.

Below her, Thor and the other two Midgardians he called friends – the archer and the woman who moved like Sif – emerged out into the light and made their way down the steps and toward the stables. Just outside the entrance Thor paused and raised his hand to Sif. She raised hers and went back to helping an officer with the buckles of his tack.

Sif was not at all like her, in so many ways, Frigga thought. In the last war she had been helpless, unable to do anything but watch the troops moving in and out of the realm, to try and discern the Weave, to be the heart of a people when her husband’s thread slipped in and out of the warp and weft of the universe and Thor grew large in her womb. Mothering a newborn through the last years of the war was a task Frigga had lain awake at night wondering if she would survive. She had much strength in her, for it had been bred into her family since the beginning of time (and naturally, both her parents and Odin’s had known a firm hand would be necessary to keep him in check, and if nothing else a queen was there to talk when the king got fool notions into his head), but in the last desperate days, when the palace had been quiet and even Thor, who had been a fussy child, lay quiet in his swaddling cloth… then, Frigga had not been sure she would last.

Her good-daughter, though… Frigga was glad the others who had come to the terrace to watch the preparations had their eyes elsewhere, for they would have wondered why the old queen smiled. Sif was strong enough to lead the realm, though she doubted her own abilities and potential to be the kind of queen that Asgard needed. She had the will to keep Loki from running roughshod over her, and the heart to know when his contrition had been honest. More than the fact that Sif would have never been happy trying to outshine Thor, more than the long years Frigga had spent watching her second son watch Sif while pretending not to… it had been Sif’s own qualities that had made up the bulk of the reason Frigga had gone to her in the first place. Her longtime friendship with Loki and the lingering attraction they had held for each other were only the vehicle.

*And so you moved them like pieces on a board, you and Odin both, Frigga thought to herself. But the game threw in something you did not intend, and now your price for your deeds is to watch the little ones you love contend with the most ancient doom of the realms.*

Her fingers clenched into fists.
The stables were not spared the flurry of activity, even though most of the horses stabled here were already out and waiting for their riders. Thor led the way down the aisle between opened stall doors toward where stablehands were pulling his horse and two others out and getting them ready.

As they passed his stall, Sleipnir put his head over the half-door and whinnied, banging his front hooves against the wood. Clint looked over, doing a double take when he realized what he was looking at.

“Is that…”

“Sleipnir,” Thor said helpfully. He paused, pulling a handful of hay off a cart nearby and offering it to the stallion, which lipped it up eagerly and watched them with ears perked forward. “My father’s mount, for as long as I can remember.”

Clint gave Thor a strange look. “The Sleipnir?”

“There is another?” Thor looked confused as Clint became very strained trying to keep a straight face. Natasha didn’t roll her eyes, but the appropriate tone of voice for it was the one she used when she responded.

“The mythology built up around Asgard holds that Sleipnir is Loki’s child,” she explained.

Thor looked at Clint very patiently. “Sleipnir is a horse,” he said.

“A horse with eight legs.”

“And he is hardly the strangest thing in the realms.”

“—but is he Loki’s?”

“That would be absurd.” Thor continued on to where his horse was stamping impatiently in cross-ties, red-and-gold saddlecloth glinting in the light. “Midgard has certainly become very creative.”

Clint still gave Sleipnir a dubious look as they passed onward toward where stablehands were just finishing tacking up the other horses; a seal brown gelding that Clint went to, and the blood bay that Natasha stood beside. Thor’s expression had become tense again. “We go,” he said, and they took their horses out of the ties and followed Thor back out into the courtyard. As they walked, Natasha leaned over.

“When was the last time you rode a horse?” she murmured. Clint gave his gelding a steady look, and could have sworn the horse looked back.

“Long enough ago that I’m really worried I’ll fall off if we go faster than a walk,” he replied. Natasha’s lips twitched.

“Makes two of us.”

“I really wish Fury had let us bring along ATVs or… anything.”

“Easier to shoot arrows off the back of a horse.”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doing on an ATV.” Clint shrugged. “It’ll be quick, anyway. I’ll be with the archers, breaking for our nests. You’re the one riding out at the head of an army.” He gave Natasha a curious look as they stood between their horses, letting the Asgardians part and bustle around them. “Why’d you accept that, anyway? I’d have thought she wanted you sneaking
around behind the lines.”

Natasha pressed her lips together in thought. “I don’t know, I just…” she looked over at Sif. The queen glittered in the light, every inch a warrior, every inch a leader. “I kind of like Earth how it is. I’ve done a lot to make it a harsher place – we both have – but Sif, I think she understands that. If protecting the Earth – or avenging it, if we have to – means riding into a battle beside the queen of a race of godlike aliens, rather than staying in the shadows, then I guess I’m going to war.” After a moment, Natasha’s lips curved into that little smile again. “And Sif needs another friend other than Thor beside her. She’s grown on me. Too bad all the aliens can’t be like her.”

“Got a crush, ‘tasha? Hate to break it to you, but she’s taken.”

“She’s a woman who’s had to claw her way into a man’s world.” Natasha studiously checked her saddle’s girth, but Clint doubted there was anything needing checking on it. “I respect her.”

Across the courtyard, Thor held Jane to him, their little corner of the yard protected somewhat by the crush of horses. Her brown hair had warmed in the sun as she’d waited for him to come back out of the stables, and he pushed his nose into it, even though it meant almost bending double. Jane had been full of her usual zeal – she’d managed to bring along equipment this time, not just the thing that she and Loki and the rest had been working on but other instruments as well, and said she intended to get as much work done as she could.

“It’ll help keep my mind off—” she’d hesitated there, for the first time looking as lost as he’d ever seen her, and Thor had had no choice then but to pull her in. He had played at war as a boy, the boy he’d been when he’d dropped into her lap months ago. Now he felt its gravity pulling him in like a dying star.

When he finally released her, Jane had collected herself, but the tears shone brighter than the stars above them, and her hands shook as she splayed her fingers out across his chest. “If you get thrown in fire giant jail, I don’t think Erik can just call and get you out this time,” she told him. They laughed, Jane a little hysterically.

“Fear not, Jane Foster.” Thor took both her hands, kissed the knuckles. “There is nothing in this or any realm that could keep me from returning to you. And should I perish… well, I cannot but think a spirit as valiant as yourself would be taken to Valhalla as well, when the skein of your life is through.”

“I’ve just got to die with a weapon in my hand, right? Hopefully I keel over cutting something up.” She smiled, but the tears were perilously close to falling, despite the fact that she was working to keep them in. “My boyfriend,” she choked out, “My space Viking alien boyfriend who helped me find all the answers I wanted, is going to war. I can’t say you haven’t made it interesting.”

“I mean to continue to make your life interesting, for as long as you will have me.” Thor cupped her cheeks and kissed her then, deeply and well, as was the only way she deserved, and felt warmth run all through him against the ice of fear when she gripped the front of his armor and raised herself up a little on it to better meet him. “Though by the time I return I do not doubt that you will have unraveled all the secrets Asgard has to offer you.”

“If anyone here thinks I’m not going to try, they’re out of their minds.” Jane’s smile was less shaky this time, though still fearful. “Just… come back in one piece, okay, Thor?”

“Of course.” Jane stepped back so Thor could mount and call Mjolnir into his hand from where he’d let it fall to the flagstones of the courtyard, and then put a hand on his leg for a moment after. Thor covered it briefly, warmly, before picking up the reins and riding over to take his place on Sif’s right.
She was collecting her own reins, seeming too focused on the job by half.

“Sif,” he said quietly. Sif did not look over, but he saw her knuckles whiten on the reins.

“Are we ready?” she asked.

“Are you?”

Sif did look over then, and though there was uncertainty in her eyes, Thor knew that determined set of her jaw, the way her lips had pressed into a hard line. Sif would not be the one to break, not today, no matter what happened.

“You doubt your queen?”

“I do not doubt my friend.”

Sif grinned then. “Good.”

Not too far away, Darcy gave Haraldr a flat look. “You want a what?”

He looked confused. Adorably confused, like a puppy running into a glass door for the first time. “A favor. To carry into battle. They are, uh, usually handkerchiefs.”

“I don’t have one of those. We don’t carry those on Earth. Usually.”

“Oh.” Haraldr looked so deflated that Darcy sighed and dug around in her pockets for a moment, coming up with a rumpled-looking tissue. She grabbed Haraldr’s wrist and stuffed it in under his gauntlet.

“Not much, but it’ll do,” she said matter-of-factly. Haraldr brightened. “Go forth, bearer of standards.”

“With my lady’s favor I ride,” he said solemnly, then grinned. “Nobody as young as I am has ever been selected to carry the queen’s banner into battle. Then again, our queens do not usually ride to war, but…” Haraldr puffed up as much as he could, and Darcy laughed, patting his knee.

“Go on or they’ll leave without you.” With a last formal bow and a very informal grin, Haraldr kneeled his horse over toward where Sif and the others were clustered together. Sif was smiling at something. That was good, right? She wouldn’t be smiling if she didn’t think they’d be okay.

*Oh, Darcy thought to herself. Warrior culture. She’s probably grinning at how she’ll die gloriously in battle. Great, Darcy, way to make yourself feel better.*

Through the crush of soldiers and horses, Fandral watched Darcy and scowled. “No lady as beautiful as she is ought to watch anyone go to war with so long a face,” he said. “Oh, it breaks the heart.”

“I hardly think it would be sporting of you to go steal anything from that poor boy Sif’s taken as her standard-bearer,” Volstagg told him. “It would be like slaying a dragon that’s already been tied down.”

“Except we did that once, Volstagg.”

“Oh,” Volstagg muttered. “Right, we did.”

“And it still is simply not right that the Lady Darcy is so unhappy.”
“That is the way of Midgardians.” Volstagg shrugged, hauling himself up onto his horse. “They do not see things the way we do, old friend.”

“She is not the only one worried.”

Surprised, the other two turned to look at Hogun, who had spent the morning looking even more grim than usual. “Don’t tell me you have got nerves, Hogun, you never have nerves.”

“I have eyes,” Hogun replied. “I can see. Surtur’s army is great.”

“But we are Asgard – we are greater!” At Hogun’s flat stare, Fandral made a face and tried again. “Barring ‘greater’, we are the Warriors Three, and even if we have to face down a thousand demons ourselves, we have done it a hundred times before! Our deeds have been told in story and song—“

“Highly exaggerated accounts—“

“—and we will not let our friend, our queen, go unaided!”

Volstagg rolled his eyes heavenward as they started getting into position. “We are all going to die,” he moaned.

Sif waited until Darcy and Jane and the others were safely out of the way – either up on the steps or pressed back behind the planters of bushes and fragrant flowers, before calling for the officers to form up on her as she trotted through. But unlike the other times, instead of moving into a canter as soon as she was clear of the arch she kept her gait slow as the officers moved through first the levies from Asgard’s affiliated realms and allies and colonies, and then through the ranks of Einherjar. Sif made sure their path was long and winding, that she made eye contact with as many as she could, before she found her place at the very front of the largest army ever fielded. Thousands of men, and her responsible for them.

Behind her, Edwik cleared his throat. “Not long now,” he murmured. Sif gripped her reins tightly.

“Courage, Thor, Natasha,” she said softly, as she felt the Bifrost’s magic begin to throb in her skull. “Courage in battle.”

With that she heeled her charger forward, and the world went white around her as the Bifrost sucked them up into the sky.

* 

Loki and Surtur turned as the messenger flew in through the window, leaving gouges in the stone floor as he dug his claws in to stop himself.

“Dire news, my lords!” he gasped. “Asgard has arrived on the battlefield with thousands of swords!”

Surtur slammed his fist down on the table, and even the spell projection of the battlefield jumped a little. “They’re early.”

“Queen Sif rides at their head—oh, surely we will all be dead!” The messenger wrung his hands. “The battle is lost before it’s begun, there is no way the day will be won!”

I hate the ones that rhyme, Loki thought to himself. He schooled his face into something close to surprise; it was enough to fool the others, at any rate. “Tell me what happened. Without any rhyming.”
Surtur gave Loki an amused look, but the messenger actually seemed taken aback by this request and had to pause, thinking for a moment, before he could continue. “The portals had just opened,” he said. “The first group had begun to move through after the command to come was spoken—uh, sorry, my lord—but in the middle of it, flashes of light appeared in the sky, and when we could look again, an army stood there. Gleaming gold, it was, brilliant as the sun that seemed attracted to each one—my apologies, lord—and the queen was at its head.”

“Were there others?” Loki asked slowly. “Besides my dear wife, I mean. No rhymes.”

“Two mortals,” the messenger said at last, after working his throat a moment more. “A man behind the standard-bearer. He carried a bow—“

“I know him.”

“—and a woman who rode at the queen’s side, a woman with red hair and the look of a warrior, if Midgard produces them.”

“And I know her.” He paused. “Any others?”

“Thor, Crown Prince of Asgard, rides beside the queen as well, my lord.”

“Of course he does.” Loki’s mouth twisted sourly. “That was not entirely unexpected. But it means we must go now.”

“Good.” Surtur made a gesture and the room started bustling, demons and other creatures shoving each other to be first out. Some flew out the windows, buzzing down the face of the keep and toward the huge portals that led through tunnels of fire to Storslette. “I was beginning to think we wouldn’t have any fun.”

Loki’s smile this time was not entirely feigned, but they need not know it was the smile of someone seeing their plans work out exactly as intended. “I never doubted for a second.”

*  

She blinked the lights of space from her eyes, and when her vision cleared, for a moment she wished it hadn’t.

The army had grown since their last update on numbers – she’d expected it, but still, the sight of the enemy laid out before her was startling… until she felt her blood begin to sing. It started slow and low, and grew until it filled every inch of her, warmth so intense that no cold fear could linger alongside it. Behind and to either side, Sif heard Asgard’s army muttering, shifting, heard the stamping of feet and the snorting of the horses.

“Edwick, commanders – take your positions,” she called, staring down the field at the roiling mass of demons still. “You have been trained well, you have been given your orders. Go!”

She let them gallop off. They weren’t the ones who needed to know her strength right now. They had seen it last night, they had their own. Nudging her horse, she wheeled to face them, brazenly putting her back to Surtur’s forces. If she could not be safe standing before her army, then she would never be safe anywhere.

“Rise!” she shouted. Her charger pranced underneath her, and she wheeled him about, black mane and tail streaming out over her hands. “Rise! They seek to strike us from the branches of Yggdrasil, but I tell you now, they cannot touch the flame of Asgard! We will never be extinguished, we will never be defeated, and to the last of us, we will burn them! For glorious death, for Asgard!”
Those closest took up the cry. “For Asgard! For Asgard and the realms of the light! For Asgard!” As Sif pulled out her blade and raised it up over her head, horse whinnying and plunging with the sudden excitement as she added her voice to the din, lightning crackled overhead and thunder rolled, and she saw Thor with Mjolnir raised, and Hawkeye with his bow above his head, and Natasha with her fist thrust into the air. She spun her charger on his hindquarters.

Distantly, across the field, Sif saw a portal open up and two figures step out of the inferno within. One was huge, muscular, horned, intimidating, carrying a huge sword. The other shimmered slightly, but was small and clothed in black. Sif did not quail, did not hesitate. She could not.

“For Asgard and the house of Odin!” she cried again, and charged. The thunder of thousands of hooves followed.

She rode into chaos.

As her charger, his ears flattened, bore her into the oncoming horde, Sif was dimly aware of the fact that a sea of gold surrounded her. There was Thor, too, off to her right – she could see his cape ripple as he laid about him with Mjolnir – and loud noises like thunderclaps from her left could only be Natasha with her guns. But for the moment she was lost in the fray, trampling lesser demons under the hooves of her horse, gritting her teeth and stabbing down with her blade into the skulls of others she missed. Her boots quickly became covered in gore, her blade dripped it, and her horse snorted and shied at the scent of blood so close, but Sif drove him on.

“Go! Go!” she shouted to Thor, and heard the low throbbing sound of Mjolnir. A moment later she saw him arc up overhead, streaking toward the portals that still stood open. Now that the initial rush was starting to fade, she hoped that Thor would not get distracted by his brother. They’d spoken a little about it last night, sitting in the receiving room just outside her bedchamber when the night’s feast had gotten to be too much for them and after Jane had gone to bed. Thor had said he would keep his focus, but Sif knew how much Loki meant to him.

But then another wave of enemies hit her, and Sif ground her teeth and kept on. Natasha was still firing beside her, precise shots that hit the mark each time. She tried spinning her horse – between the dust and the other fights going on, she couldn’t see anything – and spun back around, forging a path ahead with blade and hoof. A fire giant that got too close suddenly doubled over, nearly cut in half before it hit the ground; a lesser demon that tried to grab her horse’s bridle lost all four of its arms below the elbow, then its head.

All around her, the screeches of demons and monsters and the cries of her soldiers (and the elves, who had made their own way to Storslette, and the dwarves who came behind the Asgardians) as they carved a wedge into Surtur’s army made a wave of sound that took her over as surely as the motions of battle did. But in the back of her mind, Sif was aware that even Surtur wasn’t fool enough to put his very best troops forward. What they were fighting now was of little more use than target practice dummies. What would come after would be the true test.

* 

Back in the palace, Jane bit her lip as the Bifrost flashed in the sky, a swirl of impossible colors, and just like that the army vanished from the wide plaza. For a moment, her heart was wherever Thor was – somewhere else, some other planet.

Then one of her computers beeped, and Jane shut that down, shut it away, and turned to her work. She was angry, inexplicably – at Surtur for putting Thor in danger, at Sif for calling Thor away, at Thor for going – but it wasn’t logical, and Jane used it more efficiently instead, channeling the energy into furious typing. Just because she’d solved the issue of where didn’t mean she fully
understood the *how*, and Heimdall wasn’t available to question right now.

*Time to unravel some secrets on my own,* she thought, and bent her head over her laptop.

* *

As the main part of the army surged forward behind Sif, Clint and the other archers he’d grouped up with rode with them a short distance, then began edging away toward the areas were stands of trees grew up out of the plain. They did it slowly, trying not to call attention to themselves – the line was ahead of them, but that didn’t mean it would stay there – and finally galloped headlong free of the army.

Other groups of archers were making their way across the grassy plain, between the outcroppings of rock that were beginning to appear. It was a great place for an archer to set up – close enough to the fighting that groups of monsters were starting to break off and follow them, flying or running on six legs or what-the-fuck-ever, Clint didn’t even care anymore. He was just looking for a good place to hide the three who’d agreed to go with him.

It had been an odd moment, meeting them after the stint in the war room. Based on his age alone he’d have been considered little more than a child, but once the group of them went down to the archery range and he showed them what his bow could do, they had all warmed up considerably. And though he hadn’t wasted any of his trick arrows on a demonstration, he’d explained about them. Talking about archery, about the craft that had sustained him and now kept him employed well past normal superhero age, was something Clint would *never* turn down, even when it was to aliens who had been alive a thousand years before he’d even been born.

He made a gesture with one hand – gripping way too tightly to his reins as he did, making his horse snort and shake its head in what he swore was irritation – and the four of them broke off, slowing as they entered an area of low scrub and rocks. Clint dismounted with a distinct lack of grace and ran for a pile of boulders; the others followed suit. The horses milled about uncertainly, plunging when a bunch of monsters started heading their way.

“Let’s see what you can do, mortal,” one of the other archers hissed at him. It was good-natured, but there was a distinct glint of challenge in the other’s eye. Clint didn’t do challenges, really, but this time he smiled.

“My pleasure,” he whispered, and dialed up one of his trick arrows, nocking it when it was ready. The other archer looked askance at the strange, blunt tip.

“May you hit a very soft spot.”

“Watch and learn,” Clint murmured, and loosed his arrow. Just above and ahead of the group, the tip exploded in a puff of white smoke, and expanded into a huge net of translucent netting that caught the frontrunners and tangled them up in it, and sent the rest hurrying back with screeches, where they were picked off by other archers.

The one beside him looked over with new appreciation.

“Not bad, for a mortal hawk,” he said, and began nocking and loosing his own arrows into the netted monsters.

“Says the kid who’s shooting fish in a barrel.”

“Is that a challenge?”
Clint just grinned.

* 

“Sirs…”

Tony, Bruce, and Steve had since moved to the command deck of the helicarrier, and when one of the crew poked her head up above the bank of consoles and called Fury over, they rose as well and followed. The tech seemed surprised at that, but turned back to her screen when they were all clustered around.

“We just registered a massive event in the upper atmosphere,” she said. The spike was huge. “Big enough to disrupt some satellite feeds. But it’s resolved now.”

The four of them exchanged looks. It had begun.

*

From their vantage point, half a mile behind the front and between the two portals, Surtur and Loki watched as the day wore on. It was not a quick and dirty battle – neither of them had thought it would be, and Loki knew Sif would not have banked on that fact either – but with Thor flying around Surtur’s access to reinforcements was bottlenecked, and he had a feeling Sif had fielded the whole army at once. It was the kind of thing she would do.

“It seems that you were correct about the kinds of allies your queen would bring. Elves, dwarves, humans…”

“I have spent the last several months with her, it does give me more insight into her methods,” Loki replied, though in his mind he ran out scenarios, calculated the very precise timing he would have to have. It would have to be when Surtur saw himself winning, and—

A streak of red passed them by – close, probably far closer than he was supposed to be, but Thor had ever been reckless. Loki clenched his gloved hands into fists. Out of necessity Thor couldn’t be told, but here he was, buzzing around bold as brass, if he landed he would get killed and though Loki would have liked nothing more than to hold Thor’s face in a waterfall like that one time on one of Alfheim’s moons as punishment for sheer idiocy, he had specific goals in mind today, and killing Thor was not one of them.

Quickly he pulled on his magic, made sure he had the necessary spells ready. When the moment came it would be quick, and he would need to be quicker.

Surtur watched Thor fly by, eyes narrowed. “Unusual, to send him s—“

He was cut off by a crack and a burst of bright light, and as he blinked the afterimage from his eyes Loki swore internally. Thor had – probably at Sif’s behest – been told to crack or shatter the portal stones. Already the portal he’d chosen to take out first was beginning to wobble, to shoot flame over the heads of Surtur’s army (or into it). The giants and their monster charges nearest Thor pushed forward, trying to get to him, but Thor just directed his lightning into them next as he stood within the charred circle left behind by the destruction of the portal stone.

“He cannot keep up the lightning forever,” Loki murmured, partly to Surtur and partly to keep his own commentary of the situation. “Soon he will have to—“

With a snarl of frustration that Loki was not sure if he heard or imagined hearing, Thor spun Mjolnir and shot back up into the sky. The refractory period between bursts had been a very nasty discovery
at a very inopportune time, but now it could be useful.

“You see,” he told Surtur. “Even those who put themselves up as gods are not infallible.”

“Youself included?”

Loki spread his hands. “One plays to one’s strengths, rather than trying to bully into all of them. At least, that is the smartest way of things.”

“War is not always won by the smartest among us.” But Surtur said nothing more, and Thor was smart enough not to come close, for which Loki breathed a sigh of relief. He could have handled it, but it would have been difficult to maintain his ruse.

Still, he glanced at Surtur out of the corner of his eye. Not yet, but soon.

*

She’d dismounted long ago. The battle had worn on for hours, the sun hot overhead, and even though her armor had been designed to breathe as best it could, Sif was drenched in sweat, covered head to toe in gore and mud and dirt, and had begun to feel her muscles aching with the constant effort of movement. She bled slowly but constantly from scrapes and cuts and bites all over her body, the scabs never given time to set fully, her leggings torn, her hair falling out of its ponytail under her helm. But she kept on, not just because the men around her needed it, but because she needed it.

Sif yanked her glaive out of a five-legged monstrosity just as a warning buzz started up behind her. Yanking a knife out of its sheath at the small of her back, she flung it as she turned, making a satisfied noise as it buried itself in the thing’s throat.

“I did always love practical gifts,” she muttered, half-running over to retrieve the knife (it had been a gift the morning after her wedding and she refused to leave it to rust in something’s throat) and had just bent to wipe it clean when she was bowled over by something hot and much, much bigger than she.

Sif ground her teeth and struggled, trying to get her feet back to the earth as the fire giant pulled her up off the ground. Her glaive and the knife glittered below her – there was another knife in her boot, but she couldn’t quite reach—

“The warrior queen,” the fire giant hissed in her ear, and Sif groaned in pain as his breath and grip burned her skin. She could smell her hair burning. “I’m going to give your head to Surtur myself.”

Sif kicked back, felt the heel of her boot connect, but the giant didn’t so much as squeak. She snarled. “I don’t—“

Suddenly she was falling to the ground and dropped into a crouch, snapping up her knife in one hand and her glaive in the other, turning to see what had made the giant drop her just in time to see Thor swing Mjolnir and solidly connect with the giant’s stomach, sending it flying twenty feet to skid across the ground.

“You looked like you needed a hand,” he said. Sif nodded briskly and finished cleaning her knife, sticking it back in its sheath.

“My thanks. Have you—“

They both ducked as arrows, the tips aflame, went streaking past their heads. Thor grabbed Sif’s arm and pulled her after him to a fall of boulders, and they slipped behind one of the closest.
“Reminds me of that time with the trolls, on one of the moons of Svartalfheim!” Thor shouted to her, over the roars and shouting of the battle. Sif shot her friend a look as she gripped her glaive and unbuckled her shield from her back.

“Do you mean the time when I saved you from being stuffed into a sack and mashed like potatoes?”

Thor’s face fell for a moment. “Oh,” he said, “That was how it went, wasn’t it…” He brightened after, though. “Now the score is even.”

Sif snorted. “Were you still keeping track?”

“I lost count a long time ago.” Thor looked up, tried to stand, got more arrows shot at him that clattered across the rocks. “We must find a way back out there. Surtur is still summoning reinforcements through the portals and I have my flight, but you, Sif…”

“Hey!”

They looked up to see Clint poking his head up above some boulders above them. “There aren’t that many!” he hissed down at them. “I’ve got this!”

Sif grinned up at him. “On your own time, then, archer,” she replied, and shifted into a crouch. A moment later one of Clint’s arrows whistled overhead and exploded (with accompanying roars of pain from enemies) and Sif and Thor burst from cover. Sif dove right in, and after getting in a few kills of his own, Thor took off again. Sif watched him go for a moment before diving back into the fray.

*

The battle wore on.

Natasha had long since stuffed her guns back into their holsters, out of ammunition. She’d picked up a sword from one of the fallen Asgardians nearby, slicing and twirling with all the skill she had and more than a little grateful that Sif had given her pointers. But the enemies kept coming, and unused to the weapon as she was, she was beginning to tire.

A break came, after what seemed like hours of fighting, and Natasha dropped to one knee, pulling a plastic pouch of water out of her suit and sucking on the tube. She had had to have these pockets built in, and she wasn’t a god, not like the ones she fought beside. She needed to rest.

A cry came from beside her and Natasha was on her feet, but with a yell, an Asgardian came out of nowhere and chopped off the demon’s head, plunging his sword into its chest. Natasha dropped back into her resting crouch, studying the Asgardian as he pulled his sword out and turned toward her.

“Haraldr,” she said. “Right?”

“Right.” The young man (well, relatively, he was hundreds of years old in truth, but he looked young to Natasha and that was that) dropped beside her. “You are one of Her Majesty’s friends from Midgard.”

“They call me Black Widow.”

Haraldr peered at her. “That hardly seems the kind of name a warrior like you would have.”

“I’m not really a warrior.” Natasha rose as another group of attackers rushed toward them.
You are in a war. You fight with bravery, if it is different than that which I am used to.” Haraldr shrugged, and took her hand to stand up beside her, raising his sword. “That makes you a warrior.”

As she swung her sword into the first one, with Haraldr beside her, Natasha felt herself smile.

* 

Oh, Stars and Branches, let him end it.

* 

Surtur narrowed his eyes. He’d taken to pacing the rise they were on, heat rippling off his body. Loki was uncomfortable so close; even bleeding the heat off with magic took time. One more failing of his heritage, but he bore it without complaint or letting on that it did bother him. Perhaps if he had better mastery of what he could do as a Jotun… no, he wouldn’t pursue that line of thought.

“Summon the rest of my army,” Surtur called, and Loki looked up suddenly from where he’d been watching a group of Asgardians, not a quarter of a mile distant, with a point of silver and red at their front.

“Is that really necessary—“

“Your brother,” Surtur waved a clawed hand at where Thor had landed near one of the portals. The one he’d destabilized earlier had since been shut down, the stones blackened and shattered; the other had had one stone already broken, and now about a third of each arriving group never made it through the portal. “Your brother is cutting into my army before it even makes it to the field. Better to make a push now.”

“It seems too early, my lord…”

“I will deem when it is necessary. The Asgardians have spread out too far, their numbers dwindle. Why would you delay?”

Loki could feel it building. Just a few moments more, now… “A more opportune time may present itself, Asgard may yet rally…”

“You’re too cautious.” Surtur turned to one of the giants waiting nearby. “It’s time to strike.”

He reached for the spell he’d prepared earlier, grabbed the end of it and pulled hard, willing the magic into existence. As it spun up, Loki spun, his silver knives embedding themselves in the throats of the fire giants around them. He was precise, and fast; within a minute, all of them were dead, and Surtur was raising his sword and stalking toward Loki with rage in his eyes. Without blinking an eye, Loki flung both his hands out – knives, wrapped in sickly green spells, buried themselves both in Surtur’s torso, and the fire-lord’s roar echoed back to them from the distant mountains.

“Traitor!” he hissed. Loki smiled, walking backwards toward the thin line of shadow he’d called up. It was a portal, his portal, the first door he had to pass through.

“It’s a shameful habit,” he replied, and stepped through.

* 

On Jotunheim, Laufey turned away from some of his warriors as the illusion shimmered into existence before him. Loki’s projection this time was not nearly as solid-looking as his usual ones, but then it didn’t have to be.
“It’s time,” the illusion said. “Gather your warriors and make the journey.”

Laufey smiled, baring his teeth, as a portal opened up onto a battlefield.

*  

Everything on the battlefield stopped dead for a moment when Surtur roared. Sif yanked her blade out of a fire giant and turned toward the sound. At the farthest edge of her ability to see, she watched as Loki ducked into what appeared to be a thin line in the air, one that closed after he passed through it.

A moment later, Surtur opened up a fiery portal of his own to step through — and a few dozen fire giants followed him. Sif felt her stomach drop. With Loki’s plan being what it was, he couldn’t handle Surtur and thirty other assailants at once.

She was about to call out to Natasha — she’d seen the other woman stalking across the field with a sword not too far off — when there was a brilliantly blue flash of light just before her. When the afterimage faded, Laufey, along with more frost giants of fighting fitness than she thought Jotunheim had, stood before her.

“Queen Sif,” he rumbled, and his voice was like a glacier cracking over stone. “I was told you might be in need of assistance.”

For a moment she could only stare incredulously, and her shock stayed the weapons of the other Asgardians. Distantly she heard Thor land beside her.

“Sif?” he asked quietly, tense (after all, the last time he had been face to face with Laufey, he’d ended up banished to Midgard for it). “What are they doing here?”

“Um,” was all Sif could manage. Loki was the wordsmith, the diplomat here, and if this had been part of his plan he had told her nothing of it.

“We are offering aid that was asked for.” Laufey’s hand sprouted a glittering blade of ice, with a jagged, wicked edge. “Do you not accept it?”

Surprisingly, it was Thor who stepped in first. “We have been fighting many hours, King Laufey,” he said slowly, as though unsure of himself. “Our queen needs a moment to think.”

“Our queen’s made up her mind,” Sif cut in suddenly, her senses starting to come back to her. “If you offer your aid freely, Laufey, then on behalf of the throne of Asgard I accept it, and offer my gratitude in return. You and your warriors are more than welcome.”

She paused, unsure — the sight of a Jotun still made her gut twist a little, but after having been married to one for many months, she reminded herself there could well be more to them than the books would say. “Perhaps a little ice is what is needed to quench this fire.”

“I’m surprised it took you so long to think of that,” Laufey replied. Then he turned and loped across the battlefield, he and his warriors loosing yells as they fell upon the confused army.

“Did you call upon Jotunheim for aid?” Thor asked quietly. Sif shook her head, and grimaced as the motion pulled on a wrenched muscle in her shoulder.

“It must have been Loki’s doing,” she replied. “Though he did not speak of it to me.”

Clint and Natasha made their way over, both of them watching the Jotunn diving into battle with alacrity. “You’ve got strange allies,” Clint told her offhand, minding his fingers as he fixed an arrow.
point to one of his recovered shafts.

“I did not know we had them.” Sif adjusted her grip on her glaive, and glanced back at the rise Surtur and Loki had been on. It was empty. “My friends…”

“So what’s up with the big bad? That was him we heard yelling, right?”

“It was. Loki has started it.” Sif looked between them. “And he has taken fire giants with him, more than thirty from what I can tell. Surtur will not pay them heed while he fights Loki, and Loki did not plan to have to deal with others than Surtur.

“That’s going to be a problem,” Natasha murmured. “What do you need us to do?”

“Call upon Heimdall,” Sif told them, after a moment’s consideration. “Go to Midgard, warn your friends if they are not already embroiled in fighting. Protect your home.” She stuck her glaive in the dirt and put a hand on each of their shoulders, smiling. “You have fought bravely here, but this is not where your skills are most needed. Asgard is in your debt.”

As Clint and Natasha walked off, Sif looked at Thor too. “I would have you go with them.”

“Sif, you need me here.”

“Most likely I do.” She grinned tiredly. “But Midgard is a realm under your protection. Go protect it, my prince, and I will do my best to make sure that your house is still in order when you return.” He was beginning to look rebellious, so Sif pulled out one of her last remaining cards. “It is Jane’s home. She loves it on Asgard, any fool could see it, but Asgard is not her home as it is ours. Go and fight for what she loves. Go and fight for her.”

Thor’s jaw worked, but after a few moments he put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Luck in battle, Sif.”

“And you.” Sif fisted her hand over her heart and Thor did the same – she was his queen, after all – and jogged over just in time to be taken back up into the sky.

Sif watched them go. The sky didn’t clear much – too much smoke, too much dust in the air for that – but she felt better knowing that Midgard was going to be looked-after.

Now it was time to do her part.

* 

Loki stepped out of the shadows onto a shady path and immediately took off down it. The pathway was not crowded, but people still walked or ran along, all of them looking at him strangely. He supposed for Midgard it was allowable, wearing his battle leathers and stinking of war as he did.

The bond of the blood oath tugged in his chest and Loki paused, glancing back as people screamed and started running to either side across the grass when the fiery portal spun up behind him. Surtur stepped out, the heat roiling off his body setting fire to the trees around him – and then fire giants stepped out behind him too.

Oh, Loki thought to himself, eyes widening slightly. That was unexpected.

So he ran.

The ground shook as Surtur and his giants gave chase. Loki didn’t need to look behind to know they
were following. If the blood oath hadn’t been fizzing in his skull along with the magic he held in readiness, he would have known by the screams and sounds of panic that followed him into the twist of paths in this part known as the Ramble. He’d only had a short time to study the layout, of course, once Stark had mentioned it in a conversation over physics, but navigation wasn’t going to be the problem here.

With a push of magic, Loki split himself into seven illusive clones, sending each of them down a different path. Hopefully it would draw off some of the fire giants; Surtur would not be fooled, of course, but Loki didn’t want him to be. From the sound of it, it was working.

There were still several with the fire-lord when Loki turned and flung a nasty spell out. It caught Surtur on the arm and he snarled in pain this time.

“Insolent whelp!” he roared, and swung his twilight sword down. Loki slid to the side and flung out another spell, one that split into three and took out the same number of fire giants.

Then he was running again, leaping up onto a low barrier and running along it quick as a cat. To one side was a hill, littered with boulders; Loki flipped up, skidded down the face of one, using his momentum to carry him down the hill in a few more leaps. His boots hit the pavement of the path below, carrying him past startled tourists that babbled in strange languages and over stone bridges.

Ahead of him the path opened up onto another grassy lawn and Loki quickened his pace. A big open space – one where they could really be seen - was what he needed. Surtur landed in front of him, sword extended – Loki kept running, dropping down at the last moment and sliding under the sword, between Surtur’s legs, got back up to his feet and kept moving. One of the fire giants swung a sword, trying to catch him across the chest, but he flipped again, face passing close enough to the blade to catch his reflection in it, and made it onto the grass, slowing and turning again when he was in the middle of it.

“Did you really believe me?” he shouted, spells flickering at the tips of his fingers. “I lie habitually, Surtur, lord of no realm of consequence!”

Surtur stalked across the grass, leaving smoking, scorched ovals behind as he did. “I am no fool, boy,” he growled. “Nobody believes you to tell the truth any time a lie would fit you better. You wear those as well as you wear the pretty leathers you’ve got on.” He raised his blade, the edge catching the light and sucking it in. “I just thought you’d renege on our little pact. You made a blood oath, but those can be broken… and that’s why I planned to simply kill you and take the Tesseract for myself!”

“How original,” Loki drawled. The remaining giants had circled around them, but made no move, all waiting for Surtur’s orders. “How predictable. How perfectly boring.”

Surtur’s response was to snarl and attack. Loki indulged him for a few minutes, losing himself in the swift motions. Surtur was rock and flame and destruction but Loki was water, flowing from one move to the next, from one spell to the next, and by the time he broke free and darted across the lawn again, Surtur bled from a dozen wounds and stumbled as he fought off the effects of a powerful spell.

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki saw two streaks of light making for the park, glanced up and saw clouds beginning to gather over the lawn and felt the crackle of magic in the air, and smiled thinly. Everything was going according to plan.

He flung his hands out, opening a portal, and leaped through.
From the air, Tony watched as Loki jumped through the dark slit in the air and disappeared, then turned his attention to the big red-orange guy still there. His HUD already had a targeting lock, and Tony glanced up at the icon to activate his shoulder-mounted weaponry.

"Tony," he heard Steve say warningly over the comm, but another glance at the icon and he felt the kick as the tiny missiles shot off toward – well, that was Surtur, must be. Not many other fiery giant people around.

"Tony, stop—"

"You can’t tell me what to do!"

"No, look up!"

Tony flipped over in midair, and swore as he saw the clouds swirl in a multicolor funnel just above him. "Gotcha—"

He barely twisted out of the way in time, and his HUD (and more alarmingly his repulsors) guttered out for a moment before he got far enough away for the interference to fade out to little more than a background fuzz.

"Look who’s back from Neverland," he said, turning around as the event faded and the dust cleared. "Legolas, Xena, and Zeus. Time to get to work, everyone."

* *

He ran, through worlds that no Asgardian had set foot on in a thousand years to realms they visited every day, fought Surtur in forests and on plains and at the summits of the tallest mountains, until they were both bleeding from more wounds than they could count and exhausted.

It hurt a little to pull on his magic, to open one last portal back to Storslette, but Loki ground his teeth and ignored it, leaping through as though completely fresh. Surtur was on his heels, but it didn’t matter now.

"And here we are again," Surtur growled, stepping through. He had lost the last of his fire giant guard a long time ago, but they had been nothing more than expendable anyway. "A merry chase you’ve led, Loki Lie-smith, but a futile one in the end."

"Was it?" he asked. A gash on his arm burned as he clenched his fists, but Loki ignored it; he had endured worse pain before. "Come now, Surtur, you know I do everything with a purpose."

Surtur’s eyes narrowed, the tip of his blade coming up. "Not everything, clearly."

Their fight was more desperate this time; they were reaching the ends of their strength, the limits of their magic. Not even a cosmic power like Surtur, or a gifted genius sorcerer like Loki, could go on forever. As Loki stabbed and dodged, threw spells and landed kicks and missed punches, he knew he had to end it. And he knew exactly how.

Surtur knocked him backward and Loki flipped over as he rolled, picking himself up slowly and painfully. Dirt had been ground into his wounds and it burned, worse than any fire. What he was about to do would hurt even more, but Loki was beyond caring. He would see it work, he would make it work, because he had made it so there was no other option.
“Everything,” he gasped out, fanning his fingers to summon a certain thing from his magical pocket, “I do for a reason.”

The Tesseract blossomed into life above his palm, the blue lights inside dancing and swirling in response to the magic in the air. Loki felt its power wash over him like a cold wave, knew the Tesseract’s anger at his rejections. When he reached into the center with some of the last of his magic, grabbed the boundless power that the cube was but a peephole into and yanked with both hands, its anger turned to surprise, then cold rage.

Loki would not dare, it seemed to say. Loki did not have the heart.

_Loki dares_, he thought. _Loki wills._

He yanked again and the power flowed through him. It was like blasting a hole in a dam – cold and heat and knowledge flooded into him all at once. Loki did not make the mistake of trying to contain it, for that would have been certain death. No, he _shaped_ it, directed it around him, forced it to his vision. And slowly, slowly, the Tesseract obeyed.

“What are you _doing_, idiot boy?”

Loki’s smile was more of a grimace around clenched teeth, but his eyes were all triumph, and that was all the reply Surtur needed. He crouched, made to stab forward into Loki, but a barrier of blue energy snapped up around Loki. The blowback was powerful enough to knock Surtur back, send his sword flying off across the field. Loki yanked on the power again (gods above, but it was like trying to ride an untrained horse) and at last, it gave in.

A beam of pure blue-white light shot straight up into the sky, the crown of it spreading out, opening onto starry blackness.

* For the second time, battle stopped as all watched the light shoot up into the sky. Sif’s heart stopped too, and then began beating again, faster than ever.

“Come on,” she hissed, “Come on, Loki.”

* It was hot, but Loki didn’t feel it; freezing, but his skin did not turn to the blue of his heritage. He was not absorbing any of the Tesseract’s power (and it was bottomless, boundless) so much as he was channeling it through his body and directing it to do his bidding. It filled him, and then it flowed out.

The cube itself was still held in his hands. The leather gloves were burning away, but Loki didn’t notice. His eyes reflected only blue, his mind was full of what the cube knew, his body full of its unfamiliar magic. He was simultaneously aware of everything and of nothing, and as the Tesseract obeyed him and opened its doors, Loki became aware of so much more.

“You’re _mad_,” Surtur yelled at him over the rushing sound the Tesseract created. He made to strike Loki with his fists but the barrier repelled him again, and this time Loki snapped out with a tendril of the power and caught the demon before he could fly back.

“You are not the first to say so,” he replied, his voice carrying an odd resonance. “Shall we see if you are correct?”
He grasped the thread holding Surtur and thought up, and slowly, Surtur began to rise into the air, toward the wavering circle of space, stark against a hazy sky.

“No!” Surtur struggled, clawed for the ground, caught, but another mental tug from Loki and the Tesseract and he was rising again. “The blood bond—“

“Blood oaths can be broken,” Loki told him. “Consider this a breaking.”

He opened himself fully, let the Tesseract fill him and flow through him, tilted his head back as Surtur rose up into the air above the battleground, beyond anything he could grasp with his hands. Surtur reached out with magic – Loki batted it back like it was nothing, then slammed power into Surtur and forced him up, blocked his magic, pushed with everything he had in him and more.

The blackness swallowed Surtur, an ignominious end for a being that had plagued the realms since their beginning. As it did, though, a ripple of magic – the universe recognizing that something had fundamentally shifted, changed as it had not been meant to – tore out of the portal’s opening and screamed across the surface of the moon. Everything for miles around was flattened.

Loki remained standing, though, staring up into the black.

As the Tesseract’s power faded (even its ability to draw on the endless energy of space was limited, and he had pulled through all it had along with all he had), it wavered, but he could still see up through the long column of light that streamed into the sky. Loki looked up into the darkness, and he saw what was there, and his eyes widened in a sudden jolt of fear.

They are there, he thought foggily. But that was all, and as the door began to wobble, to become unstable and close, it was wiped away. Loki had pushed his body to its limits and beyond, had fully exhausted his magic by building portal after portal and fighting for so long, for this last push with the Tesseract. Not even its energy could sustain him anymore.

The cube fell from his scorched, unfeeling fingers and tumbled into the grass. It was dimmer than before, the blue energy contained within it only rolling slowly like a gentle sea; he had drained it of power, and it had gone dormant once again. As he dropped it, the white light faded, and the portal up above tilted crazily, the starlight through it warping before it snapped shut.

Finally Loki let his head drop. He didn’t have the energy to keep it up anymore, just as when he fell to his knees, then onto his side, it was because his muscles had all gone slack. A gash on his side burned as he twisted, but it was as far away as the stars he had seen, and Loki ignored the pain as he rolled over onto his back.

I have done it, he thought to himself as the darkness that had etched itself into his mind began to claim him for itself, creeping in at the edges of his vision and crawling inward. I have done it.

He closed his eyes.
I owe thanks to a lot of people. If I listed them out by name, it would take almost as long as this chapter to do so, but they know who they are. So - to my betas, to Cait, to the Skype crew, to the Tumblr posse, to anyone who ever left a comment or sent me an ask on my tumblr about this wild ride of a fic, thank you all. And to those who come after - thank you too. I've had a lot of fun writing this, and I hope you all have had as much fun reading it.

This will not be the last you see of this ‘verse, either.

fusion; the process of combining two or more distinct entities into a new whole.

The sun had sunk low on the horizon. No one was sure when it had become so late; time had slipped away from them in battle, and the shockwave from whatever had happened to Surtur had confounded everyone, no matter what side they were on. Most of Surtur’s army had fled, though there were still distant noises of battle from where groups cleaned up the stragglers. It was impossible to see where; smoke from dozens of fires obscured the sky, turning the sunlight into a sickly orange-brown haze that choked man and horse and demon alike.

The ground was charred under Sif’s boots as she walked and muddy where it was not. The smoke stung her eyes and burned her throat, but she paid it no mind, climbing over the corpses of demons and monsters and horses. Sometimes she would pause, covering one of her own men with his cloak so that those who were coming after her knew who to carry back to lay with the rest of the glorious dead. But they weren’t who she was looking for.

Occasionally, someone would see her and call out to her, but after getting a glimpse of the look on her face would fade back into the smoky haze. Their queen had some other task on her mind, they explained, and would come to them soon enough. Sif’s eyes were fixed ahead of her, sweeping the field for some sign, anything—

The ground rose beneath her feet, and for a moment Sif paused to turn and take in the destruction behind her. So many had made their way to the doors of Valhalla today, and so many to Hel, and Asgard was safe, and yet she could not even find the one person she needed here in this carnage.

She looked back then and that was when she saw him.

Sif scrambled up the rise, tripping over bodies and the detritus of battle (not so much here, not much had made it to this point so close to where Surtur had been), and dropped gracelessly to her knees beside Loki. He was still and pale, even his lips bloodless, and the battle leathers that had fit so well to him for so long were all but burned away – where they were not slashed to ribbons, showing death-white skin and angry red wounds underneath. He had burns, too – not just on his body, but when she reached for one his hands the fingertips were blistered and raw, and so were the palms.

“Loki,” Sif hissed, one hand holding his and the other grasping his shoulder. “Loki, please…”

He did not respond to her voice or to increasingly desperate shaking, until at last Sif could only rest
her fists against his chest and then rest her forehead on top of them. His skin was cold, colder than it usually was, and Sif smoothed her hands over what she could of it, eventually sliding them up to grasp his shoulders again, unable to move, unable to do anything. All her skill in battle, all the exhaustion of the day, and suddenly it seemed worthless.

How long she was there, Sif could not say, only that the sun had lowered more by the time she felt strong, familiar hands grasp her shoulders and try to pull her away. Angrily – who could pull her away from her husband, her king? – Sif fought back, her hands clutching the tattered remains of Loki’s battle gear. Thor was stronger than she was though, and more determined, and he pulled her up and twisted her to face him. She almost lashed out, but then sense came to her and she could see the fear in her friend’s blue eyes, the fear for her and for his brother.

“Sif,” he said quietly, his hands moving from her shoulders, thumbs skimming her jaw. Weariness, heartsickness, it all pressed in on her as she grasped Thor’s wrists.

“He is cold,” she choked. “He is **too** cold, and he does not move, and—“

“Quiet now,” Thor murmured. With one hand still on her he reached out to his brother’s chest, his throat. “Be still, Sif.”

“Thor, what if he is—“

“Hush.” It carried the command of a king in it and after taking another gasping breath, Sif did her best to heed him. Thor did not always sound like that – she could count the number of times he had on her fingers – so when he did it was better to listen. And she was glad she had, for suddenly Thor went very still, as though trying to be sure of something. Then he released her and pressed his ear to Loki’s chest. His face changed, became strained, and Sif felt her heart constrict.

“So he is—“

“He lives,” Thor breathed, relief flooding his face. With one hand he took up Mjolnir, the other cradling Loki’s shoulders and lifting him up. He held the silver, star-bright metal of his mighty hammer up to Loki’s lips, and as Sif watched, she saw the silver dull just a bit, fogged by the barest puff of living air. Thor looked at her, the dirt on his face cracking as he broke into a smile. “Loki is **alive**, Sif.”

She froze, looking from Thor to Loki, reaching out a hand (there was a cut across the back of it she didn’t remember getting, she noticed in a daze) and touching her fingertips to his chest, sliding her palm up until it rested over his heart and closing her eyes. After what seemed an impossibly long time, she felt it. His heart was weak and slow, but it was there beating in his chest, and he was breathing, and while she could not put his nearness to death out of her mind hope blossomed in her chest as white-hot as the stars.

“He lives,” she breathed.

It was as if those words were a catalyst. Sif got her feet under her and pushed past Thor, scooping Loki up. She was a woman but she was not weak, and she felt a surge of strength in her, a need to protect him herself. It was awkward carrying him; he was taller and heavier than she, and for all her strength she had spent much of herself in battle and swayed dangerously until Thor put out a hand and steadied her.

“Sif,” he began, but stopped at her look, simply nodding and stepping back as she started picking her way across the battlefield as gently as she could.
He began to follow her but paused, looking over his shoulder. The Tesseract glinted in the blackened grass, and even though the reaction was much more subdued, Thor felt the hairs on his arms prickle under his mail. Grimly, he gathered up a corner of his cape and grasped the cube with it, wrapping it securely so that he would not touch it. Then he was off after Sif, moving ahead to clear her path as best he could.

When they finally reached the Bifrost site, they found that Eir had sent some of her junior healers out to do what they could to organize the wounded and stabilize the worst. One of the healers caught sight of them walking up and gasped, nearly dropping his armload of supplies.

“My queen,” he asked, crossing to her as quickly as he could as more healers looked up curiously, then with more shock as they realized who it was. “My queen, what—”

“The king needs Eir’s hand,” Sif said, and Thor did not hear his friend, only a leader giving orders. “He is alive but barely, and we have very little time.”

“Yes—yes, of course, this way.” He led them through the long rows of wounded and dying. There was a clear space in the center of it all, with people milling about – healers, the miraculously unscathed, horse-handlers, those not wounded enough to need care. Thor was a step behind her, and could see the strain shaking every muscle in her body. She needed care too – her armor was muddied and scratched, blood oozing from between plates and under mail. He would not ask to carry Loki for her, but as they made their way to the center of the cleared area, Thor touched her back and caught her eye, and after a moment Sif eased Loki’s feet to the ground and Thor shrugged one of his brother’s arms over his own shoulders.

“Heimdall,” Sif said quietly, “Open the Bifrost, bring us home.”

As he felt the magic gather overhead, Thor looked at his brother. Loki was bloodless pale, hair hanging around his face. He may be breathing, his heart beating, but if they did not work fast, he would die. Thor did not want to think about what would happen if he did; the very idea made his blood run cold.

* 

The Healing Rooms were bustling again, but when people saw that Sif and Thor were moving toward them, with Loki lifeless between them, they moved aside as quickly as they could. Their approach sent some of the healers running for Eir, and as they reached the first open-air court, a fountain tinkling in strange serenity counterpoint to the chaos around it, she caught up to them.

“Let me see him,” she commanded, and obligingly everyone cleared back as she cupped Loki’s face and raised his head, felt under his jaw and along his throat and down over his chest crossed with wounds and claw marks and scrapes. When she went pale under her olive complexion, Sif’s stomach dropped.

“He will need all the aid I can give, and more besides,” Eir whispered, then raised her voice. “Thor, please help us get him to a room and then go find your mother, I will need her help on this. Sif—” Eir considered her for a moment, then smiled. “He will need your strength as well, my queen.”

The three of them found an unoccupied room and Sif and Thor laid Loki on the bed as gently as they could. Thor saw his brother settled and then went to go carry out Eir’s request, and was surprised when she followed him to the doorway.

“How badly wounded is she?” the healer asked briskly. Thor glanced over at Sif without moving his head much, though he doubted she’d have noticed. She had already seated herself on the bed, doing
her best to help the junior healers in removing torn leather and bent metal from Loki’s prone body. Her movements were businesslike, efficient, but her face was pinched with exhaustion and worry.

“Bad enough to need a healer’s attention soon,” Thor said. “Perhaps worse than that, even. Sif has a talent for masking her own hurts so well that betimes she forgets she has them.”

“Don’t I know it.” Eir pursed her lips. “I will make sure she is tended soon. Your brother is in grave danger, but I will not save him only to worsen her condition.”

“Yes, of course, Lady Eir.” Thor bowed, and watched as Eir turned and began issuing orders to the healers in the room. Loki lay atop the sheets, pale enough to blend into them, and Sif with not much more color than he. The sight made Thor’s chest ache, and he turned away, uncomfortable and anxious, and made his way out of the healing rooms. On the way people stopped him and Thor offered what words of comfort or encouragement that he felt he could, small though they were. Those he spoke to smiled, though, and seemed more content, and for all his weariness Thor felt a bit of energy come back to him.

A guard he asked said that the Lady Frigga had gone up to her rooms to fetch supplies she had there and that no one had heard from her since, and Thor was worried enough to duck out of an open-air terrace and fly himself up to Fensalir. His mother was not there, but he heard voices from inside and followed them through his mother’s day room and receiving chambers toward the bedchamber.

Something caught his eye – a pile of cloth, some of the paper packets of herbs he remembered watching his mother make and label in her neat handwriting, scattered across the floor. Had something happened here? Thor gripped Mjolnir tightly, the other keeping hold of the bundle of his cape that still shielded the Tesseract.

“Mother?” he called. The voices stopped, and his mother emerged from the outer balcony. Her eyes shone with tears that had not yet followed the ones leaving tracks down her cheeks, and before he knew it she had come and wrapped him in her arms, mindless of the grime that coated him head to foot.

“He is back,” she whispered. “He is returned.”

For a moment, Thor stepped back and looked at Frigga strangely, wondering if she’d perhaps been overcome somehow. And then he looked beyond her, over her shoulder, and his own eyes widened.

“Father?”

*

When Thor returned some time later, the Healing Rooms had become even more crowded. Servants were bustling around, making up extra beds in the shared rooms and carrying those who needed immediate attention to where they could get it. As he – and the two people with him – passed, though, activity stilled, voices stopped, save the moans and whimpers of those who were too delirious and wounded to be aware of their surroundings. The people watched the three of them with wide eyes and as they passed, started murmuring excitedly.

Thor held the door hangings aside and let them fall as soon as everyone was in the room. Sif had not moved from where she’d seated herself, though Loki was now stripped of the remains of his light armor and had been clothed in the soft trousers everyone admitted to the Healings Rooms wore. Thor sucked in a breath; even without the ripped leather to make it look worse, his brother had been battered and bruised far beyond anything Thor had seen before. Loki usually took pains to stay at the outskirts of battles, to use his magic more effectively along with his little knives. To be in the thick of
things with a foe so powerful…

A clang brought him back. Eir had dropped a pitcher of water she’d been pouring into a basin, her eyes wide.

“My king, I—" she began, then stuttered into silence, looking at the bed. “That is to say, Your—"

“Peace, Eir,” Odin told her, holding up a hand. “There are more important matters right now. My son?”

“I—yes, my lord, he…” Eir looked at Loki again. “He is gravely wounded, but it goes beyond that. I think it is—my lady, if you could?"

Frigga had already gone and pressed her fingertips to Loki’s forehead, eyes half-closed and full of sadness and worry as she looked over her second son. “It is his magic,” she murmured. “Is that what you thought as well?” At Eir’s nod, Frigga continued. “He has exhausted all his own – completely, utterly, but it goes beyond that.”

“The Tesseract,” Sif said. Her voice was rough. “He channeled its power through him, enough to dim the cube itself.”

“I had hoped that the stories of the Tesseract out in the Realms were untrue.” Odin went to the edge of the bed, pressed his hand over Loki’s. “He is lucky to live, if he touched even a sliver of the power the Tesseract can unleash.”

“With all due respect, my lord, he will not if we delay much longer.” Eir had refilled the pitcher and now steam curled from the basin she had poured it into. “These wounds must be cleaned and tended so infection does not set in, and he must be cleansed of Surtur’s taint. That is dark and powerful magic, and even then, it will be some time before he wakes.” She said no more, but the if he wakes was plain on her face. The only change in Odin’s expression was a tightening around his eye.

“Then I will take my leave. I must speak with my son and with Sif.”

“Father,” Thor said, slowly. “I think it may be best to let Sif stay with Loki. She will want to see him through what the healers do, and see to her own wounds.” He caught Sif’s grateful expression and smiled a bit at her in return, though he was nervy. In the past, every time he had stood up to his father had been for reasons of selfishness, of wanting something and being denied. It was a little more intimidating doing so with different motivations entirely. “I think it best if we all wait to see how my brother fares.”

There was more than one surprised look thrown his way, but Thor held his father’s gaze steadily. This felt as though it was the right thing to do, and so he would stick with it, for the sake of his brother and Sif and their ordeal. Odin’s one-eyed gaze grew weightier the more time passed, and out of the corner of his eye Thor saw Frigga’s hands still as she watched them, but at last Odin nodded in agreement.

“Then it will be thus.”

“You have only just awakened,” Frigga said briskly. She had already bent over Loki, her sure hands using a clean cloth to dab the grit and grime from one of the long slashes on his arms. “It is not for you to resume ruling, husband.”

“My lady, I—" Frigga’s look was sharp enough to make her husband still his tongue, and for the others in the room
to look away, slightly embarrassed. “The realm is in enough upheaval,” she said. “But what it needs now is the same as all of us need - rest, and care. Thor, go and have your hurts seen to, then go to your lady – she has been working so feverishly for us that I am worried for her own health. Send a healer in to see to the queen. And, husband dearest, you may wait here or elsewhere, but you are not to make decisions on affairs of state. Any that come up will be dealt with later. Right now, our king needs our attention.” She looked round at all of them. “Well? Go on with all of you!”

One by one they filtered out. Before he left, Odin paused at Sif’s side, looking at the hands she had clasped around one of Loki’s. Sif felt small under his regard, for a moment, but then remembered herself and looked up to meet his eye. For a long time they studied each other, and then Odin put his hand on her shoulder, let it rest there heavily, before he turned and left the room.

* 

At some point junior healers came in with their supplies, eyes dark-ringed and meticulous robes rumpled. They were clearly exhausted themselves, but still they did their best to pry Sif away from Loki’s bedside, to get her to a couch not five paces away where they could work on her. She let them, for a time – let them clean the worst of the wounds, removed most of her armor, let them bring her a loose tunic and fresh leggings and old, soft boots and take the rest up to her bedchamber. When they left she took up her post again, watching as Eir and Frigga did what they could to clean and stitch torn flesh together, washing him with water that slowly turned a dirty pink.

When the suns had completely set over Asgard and the brilliant wash of Yggdrasil arched across the skies, they at last stepped back. At a look from Frigga, Eir left and her servants quickly began clearing away the dirtied cloths and the basin of water, until only the three of them were left. Frigga came and sat with Sif, facing her. For a moment they watched Loki. He had never been a match in size for most Asgardians, but now he looked even smaller, there in the furs. Sif clasped his hand again; it was still far too cold, but she knew she was warm, and hoped some of that warmth would reach him.

“We have done what we can for his body,” Frigga said at last, after she’d laid her hand atop theirs. “Using the Tesseract’s power as he did has left wounds we cannot heal with all our arts, though. If he wakes, it is a good sign. He will be weak until he recovers his magic, but he will live.”

Sif nodded, glad that someone was not dancing around ifs and maybes. “I will stay with him,” she replied. Frigga smiled gently.

“He is in no better hands than those of someone he loves.” She rose, moving about the room and opening the hangings so that light from outside filtered into the room. Sif watched the slow rise and fall of her husband’s chest, only half paying attention.

“How long?” she asked. “How long until he wakes, do you think?”

Frigga paused in tying off the last set of curtains. “We may hope for tomorrow,” she answered at last. “If but briefly. But it would not be a bad sign if he sleeps until the day after. Beyond that...” She drew a shuddering breath, and Sif looked over suddenly, for to her Frigga had always been steady, not unemotional but in control.

“Tomorrow,” she said, wrapping her hands around Loki’s again. “It will be tomorrow.” She just wished she was not trying to convince herself too.

* 

Thor was sitting on one of the benches in a promenade leading to the Healing Rooms, elbows on
knees, hands folded. Frigga’s heart ached to see him so; Thor was such a light to others that when he was sad, the stars themselves seemed a little dimmer to her. Perhaps it was just her mother’s heart.

He looked up at her approach. “My brother?”

“He sleeps.” She collected her skirts and sat beside him. “We have done all we can. The rest is up to Loki, I fear.” Thor drew in a breath and let it out slowly, and Frigga put her hand on his back, rubbing soothingly over the leathers he wore. It had always been frustrating for Thor, she knew, when a problem came up that his physical strength could not solve, and not because he was not intelligent enough to think through a problem but because he had little experience in it. He just had always had Loki beside him for those, but take one brother away and the other floundered.

“You brother is strong,” she said. “He has been strong these last months, through many trials that would have given your father pause.”

“Our father…” Thor looked down at his hands. “Mother, I have a question…”

“Anything, my son.”

“. . . it is about Loki, and Father, and Loki’s heritage.”

“Ah.” Frigga stilled her hand for a moment, but then resumed her soothing motions. She had thought this might come up sooner or later. It was probably better her to speak to Thor about Odin. “You wonder why your father kept it from Loki—from both of you.”

“It has done so much damage,” Thor said quietly. “Loki and I—we fought when he came to Midgard, and there was so much hurt and anger in him, Mother, I thought I would lose him to it. I am still not sure if I did or not. I cannot but think that Father—that he made a mistake.”

“You and I both, my son.” Frigga sighed, watching the city. “I had wanted to tell Loki from the beginning, and as I watched him grow in his magic and mind and watched as he became more and more an outsider even within your group of friends, I tried more than once to prevail upon your father to tell Loki. We did not want him to feel different, to feel like his home was not here, that our family was not truly his. Your father has a soft heart, under all his armor. He could not bear the thought of one of his sons upset, unhappy, though he has a very peculiar way of showing it I will admit. We love Loki, as much as we love you.” She smiled a little. “I think he began to see it a little for himself, lately.”

“I hope so. It does explain much.” Thor looked at her. “I cannot see him ruling Jotunheim, Mother. I can see him king, but here. He belongs here.”

“I think he does too. Jotun though he is, he was raised as one of us, and he would never forget that. This has always been what he wants. Whatever he has said about being content with his lot, I know there is much ambition in him.”

“He is a good king.” Thor smiled a little. “A better king than I would be, in some ways.”

“In some ways, yes. But you have strengths Loki lacks in, just as he knows things you do not. You would be a very different king than he, but you would both be good kings.”

She could see another question brewing on Thor’s face, and imagined she knew what it would be.

“What happens now, Mother?” he asked at last. “If—when Loki wakes, there will be three of us. Who leads?”
“I cannot say now,” she murmured. “That is something the three of you must discuss. You will all know what is best for Asgard. I did not marry a fool, nor did I raise two more.” She rose again, pressing her lips to Thor’s forehead. “Go rest, my son. These are questions that can be addressed when a loved one is not so close to the gates of Valhalla, and your lady is missing you, I am sure. Now, say goodnight to your mother, and go.”

Thor smiled a little at the mention of Jane, and rose too. “Goodnight, Mother,” he said obediently, and kissed her on both cheeks before heading for the stairs. She watched him go, smiling a little.

*I have raised two fine sons*, she thought to herself. *Stars, let them stay together.*

*

There were no feasts that night, not even for the soldiers and Einherji who were not injured badly enough to stay in the Healing Rooms. The realm held its breath. Loki slept, and Sif tended him, steadfast as she stroked the sweat from his brow. He did not twitch or mumble in his sleep as he usually did, but wherever his dreams took him, she did not think they were very pleasant.

Far above them, in a balcony hung with red and gold, Thor let Jane relax back against him. They had moved one of the loungers out under the stars and piled it with furs, more for comfort than warmth, and when Jane pulled one of them up to her chin, Thor didn’t mind, even though he knew he’d be boiling hot soon. She had had to be pulled away from the work she was doing, helping the wounded as best she could. He’d been very dismayed to take her hand and pull her away from her tasks, only to have her turn an alarming greenish shade and vomit into the nearest potted plant, but she’d smiled at him and had eaten voraciously when he’d had dinner brought up and insisted she felt fine. But he could feel her weariness in the way she drew his arms around her under the furs and brought her legs up.

“How’s Sif holding up?” she asked, after they had spent several minutes watching the stars in silence.

“She remains at Loki’s side. I think she will stay there until he wakes or until Ragnarok itself comes.” Thor pressed his lips to Jane’s hair, as he had this morning. It was good to feel her warm and alive in his arms after the bloody business that had been the day, after seeing his brother lay near death with Sif looking nearly as pale as she sat beside him.

Part of him imagined that was why the idea that had been rolling around in his mind since he had returned from Midgard had taken root so quickly. Given more time he probably would have consulted others – his brother, his mother – but ever had he followed his heart. Thor’s heart was telling him this was right.

“I would stay with you until Ragnarok as well,” he said at last. “If you would have me, Jane, I would keep you by my side forever.”

She said nothing for a long time, but Thor felt her tense. “Forever is a really long time, Thor. Is it even… is it possible?”

“The apples grown in Idunn’s orchards are eaten by every Asgardian, to give us eternal youth and vitality,” Thor replied slowly. “I have never heard of a mortal becoming one of us through this, but I do not think it would be different. Think of it, Jane, you could live among us, be one of us…”

“You’re… in line for the throne, aren’t you? I would be queen one day wouldn’t I?”

“Yes…”
“Thor, I don’t know if I want to be queen or even if I want to live forever.” Jane twisted in his arms—though she didn’t leave them, at least, and that made it a little better—and looked up at him seriously. “I mean… it would be great to live here. I love your home, I love the people here, I love you. I just don’t know if I could give up my own home for it. I don’t know if I could watch all my friends and family grow old and die.”

“And I do not want to watch you die,” Thor said, a little more emphatically than he meant to.

Jane sighed. It wasn’t exasperated or frustrated at least, more thoughtful than that. “It’s not that I don’t want to marry you, Thor—I mean, that was what you were asking, right?” At his nod she continued. “I want to, I do. I just… I don’t know that I could live knowing everything I loved on Earth, everyone I knew and eventually all their children and their grandchildren were all gone. I know I could adapt eventually, I’d have all the time I wanted to learn about the stars, about the realms… but…” she sighed, untangling one of their hands and running her fingers through her hair.

They sat there for a while like that, until Jane headbutted his chin gently and curled back into his arms.

“We’ve got time to talk about it,” she said. “All I know is that however long I live, I want to spend it with you.” She paused, and he could feel her grin a little. “As long as you don’t mind that I fully intend to be the authority on Asgard and interplanetary travel via Bifrost within the next couple years. So that’s going to take up some time.”

Thor felt some of the darkness that had settled on him lift, and pushed the rest of it away. However they made their way, whatever their decision was, he would consider each year, each day with Jane a treasure. Their worth was not in their number, but in how they were spent.

“Then it is good that you have a very willing liaison,” he told her.

Jane stretched up to kiss him but he met her halfway, and the last of the tension drained from their bodies, replaced by the heat that was always coiled just below the surface, waiting for its chance.

*

The time candle marked only a few hours until dawn, but Odin had not yet found his way into the bed he shared with his wife. Part of it was, he thought, that he had spent the last several months asleep. Being aware of one’s surroundings was not the same as experiencing them, and for all that his mind had been occupied while he slumbered, his body had rested, and now was full of energy.

The other part was likely because of the situation he had found upon waking. Of his two sons Odin would have thought Loki the least likely to plunge Asgard into war, but when Frigga had sat down with him and told him of the events since he had fallen into the Odinsleep, Odin had begun to think that perhaps war had been unavoidable no matter if Loki was king or if he himself had ruled. It would have taken longer under his own rule, but he thought that between the two of them, Sif and Loki had prepared the realm as best they could, and despite that they led a people grown soft with long dominance, they had prevailed. Everywhere he looked as he wandered the palace, he saw exhausted soldiers, residents of the palace who despite their own inaction looked wearied, but in each face there was hope. That would never have been, not under a king who broke the spirits of his people.

Of course, he thought as he walked, even if Loki had been so inclined, he doubted Sif would have allowed it. But he did not think Loki would have done such a thing. The boy could be mercurial, prickly, malicious betimes, but—
No, Odin thought, pausing in his steps. Loki was no boy. Odin had looked away for too long and his foundling son had become a man, had married and been given Gungnir and ruled.

The terrace he had stopped in opened to the air and he went to the gilt railing, staring out over the spires of the city and the rim sea beyond. It had never been his intent to drive Loki away, to drive either of his sons away. Thor had been the easier of the two for Odin to deal with, but that was because Thor could not but be open with people he loved, and even then he felt he had managed to let Thor’s arrogance go unchecked too long. Odin had not known what to do with Loki, would not have known even if the burden of his secret parentage had complicated matters; they were too similar in too many ways.

He sighed and pushed away from the railing, making his way into the Healing Rooms once more. At this hour there were only a few healers circulating to the different rooms; most of the people therein slept, or came close to it in the haze brought on by being dosed to the gills with pain-deadening concoctions. Some who were awake he paused by, clasping hands with them but always moving on, and most seemed to know what he was about and left him alone. He could feel their eyes on his back, of course – Odin, son of Bor, who had been a-slumber all these months – but they said nothing and did not stop him.

The hangings were still drawn in the doorway of Loki’s room, and Odin eased them aside a few inches to see Loki still in the bed. He had rolled – or had been rolled – onto his side, and though he was still paler than usual, some of his color had returned.

Sif walked back into his line of sight then, in a light sleeping shift. She reached out, her fingertips brushing his cheek before she lay down on the bed and slid herself under one of Loki’s arms. After a little bit of adjusting so that his arm under her was situated in a more comfortable place, she put her hands over his and pulled them in, curling in on herself. She did not cry, simply closed her eyes, drew a small, shuddering breath, and fell asleep.

Odin watched them. Frigga had always said there might be more wisdom in wedding Loki to the realm – she had not approved of using him so, and he could see her face when she had suggested the union, her lips pursed in that disapproving way of hers but her eyes canny and measuring – and had insisted there was a ready bond between his second son and the lady warrior enough to make use of. Too many people discounted a woman’s wisdom, particularly his wife’s, and in hindsight Odin ought to have listened to her more often. He might be the one to sit the throne, but it was Frigga who did much to keep Asgard running smoothly, and even he could not fool himself about it.

He was about to drop the hanging when motion caught his eye and he hesitated, watching closely. Loki’s fingers curled around his wife’s, almost as if by reflex, and his breathing deepened and eased.

Odin let the cloth hanging swing closed and left as he had come. When Loki awoke there would be much to speak of, but for now he felt weariness creeping upon him, and left to seek his own bed.

* 

For once, Sif did not wake at dawn. Wearied by war and worry, she slept curled against Loki until well after the sun had risen above Asgard’s rim. The healer coming in to build the fire back up and check on them was what roused her from sleep, and after she stilled the man’s hurried apologies, she pulled off her shift and let him examine the wounds crisscrossing her body. He seemed pleased, and smeared more ointment over her skin before moving over to Loki as she dressed again, this time in a loose dress that did not press too much against her hurts, and ate the cold breakfast a servant brought in.

As she was braiding her hair Eir came in and conferred with the healer a moment, their voices barely
audible over the crackling of the fire. Sif watched them, moving back to Loki’s side. He seemed better this morning, at least. The lines between his brows had eased, and his color was back. Still pale enough for the slashes across his skin to stand out red and angry, but they were healing well, so she took up the pot of salve and began smearing it over them with quick, efficient motions.

At last Eir came over and checked Loki herself, seeming pleased. That was heartening.

“Has he awoken?”

“Not yet.” Sif paused, resting her hand on his chest. His heartbeat felt stronger than it had been when they’d taken him from the battlefield, his breathing more regular. She began binding his wounds with clean clothes, her worry somewhat abated for the moment. “But he is improving?”

“He is.” Eir looked at her now, grasping Sif’s chin in her fingertips and turning her head this way and that to examine the scrapes left by her armor and mail rubbing her skin raw. The least of her wounds, certainly, but Eir simply nodded and let her go. “As fool as it was to exhaust his magic and then try to act as a conduit for the Tesseract, he has strength in him.” She smiled. “I will leave instructions for the healers not to disturb you unless it is necessary. We will know if he wakes.”

“Thank you, Lady Eir.”

“No need to thank me, child.” Eir seemed to catch herself, and smiled again, a little more ruefully. “Forgive me, my lady. I still remember you and the king and prince as children. I forget that a thousand years have passed.” She bent, straightening the fur over Loki’s chest a bit, her expression going pensive. “It is easy to forget time when little changes.”

Eir left, and Sif sat there looking after her for a few more minutes, lost in thought, before she turned and slipped her hands around Loki’s again.

*

Like the night before, breakfast was not an affair for the full court this morning, but Jane and Thor went up a level to eat with Frigga and Odin, in the shade of a broad-leafed tree. Darcy was nowhere to be seen, but they had talked on the way up to the gardens and neither of them were worried for her; Thor had seen Haraldr looming solicitously around her the night before after he’d returned, looking weary and frightened and pleased all at once as he inexplicably handed her a crumpled tissue when she flung her arms around his neck. The boy would do right by her, surely.

Jane had voiced her own worries, though. She had spent part of the morning in the bathing room emptying her stomach, and still looked pale as the servants placed their food in front of them. She insisted it was because this was the first time she was meeting the Odin, and continued to insist despite Thor’s protests that his father could not possibly find fault with her.

So far, things were going well. Jane had only stumbled half a step when they’d emerged into the milky morning sun, and had held up as well under Odin’s scrutiny and questioning. Thor personally thought that his mother was the one whose goodwill it was better to cultivate, but it was clear by the way Frigga would gently nudge Odin’s arm when his questions began to take unnecessary tacks that Jane did not have to worry in that regard. Despite her pallor and the way she ate far more than usual, Jane held her own.

It was difficult to tell, with his father. For a long time Thor had thought that he knew his father’s mind without question, but it was obvious now that he knew very little. Even as breakfast ran down, Thor studied his father over the rim of his cup, and wished he was half as good at reading people as Loki was.
“Eir has said he sleeps still,” his mother was saying. “And Sif remains at his side.”

“She is not with the soldiers?” Odin made a noise as he pulled two grapes off the bunch still on his plate, and either ignored or didn’t see the sharp look Frigga gave him.

“Beyond even her oaths as wife and queen, she is a warrior sworn to serve and protect the king of Asgard,” she said pointedly. “Sif would not abandon this duty, nor would any soldier worth his armor question her, not when they all respect her as they do. In any case,” and she very primly sipped her flagon of chilled juice before continuing, “Eir has said that he may well wake today. And in that vein, do you need to speak with her, dear?” This was directed at Jane, who seemed to have lost her voracious appetite and was staring at the remainder of her food queasily. “You look white as a sheet and Thor tells me you were unwell this morning – you were yesterday too, were you not?”

Jane’s shoulders twitched in the way she had when something had just hit her, and her lips parted for a moment before she looked up. “Maybe… maybe I should,” she said, her voice sounding just a touch too high. “Can I talk to you too, Lady—uh, Frigga? Please?”

The women shared a look that had Thor putting his cup down to watch them curiously, wondering what they both seemed to know that he had missed. Then Frigga nodded and dabbed her mouth clean.

“I think perhaps we ought to,” she agreed. “Carry on, husband, Thor.”

The two men watched them go; Thor was by turns apprehensive about what could be wrong with Jane and pleased that they got along so well, and so he had a small smile on his face when Odin said, “She is a remarkable mortal.”

“She is the most brilliant one among them,” Thor agreed happily. “She believed me with most others thought me mad, she did not let their doubts stop her from giving me hope when I would have had none.” He paused as the two of them disappeared through a door to the corridor outside of Fensalir. “She loves me enough to have been willing to let me return home, even if it meant leaving her.”

He felt his father’s gaze on him, but did not flinch or look away when he met Odin’s one-eyed stare. “Do you love her then, my son?” he asked. “A mortal, fated to grow old and die?”

Thor thought of their conversation last night, of how Jane had reacted to the idea, and ran a hand through his hair. “I would have her become like one of us, but it is a choice I leave to her. I will not force her to bend to my will. I love her and so I respect her, for as long as we are together.”

“Perhaps wise. She is like your mother, in many ways, not least of which would be the very keen edge of her tongue.” Thor had to work to keep his face straight at his father’s words; Odin had made an offhand remark about humans being inferior in efforts of scholarship, and Jane had fearlessly told him precisely what she thought of that statement. Apparently nothing deterred her from speaking her mind.

“I mean to wed her,” he said, and was glad the reaction was less than he thought it would be. Odin put his flagon down and fixed Thor with a very piercing gaze, and Thor met it. The least he could do was be as strong and steadfast as Jane was. “If we have but a short time together, I would make as much of it as I could.”

“You are prince – perhaps king, soon—“

“No.” Odin seemed surprised that his son had interrupted him. If Thor was honest with himself, he was surprised he had done it as well, but now that it was done, Thor continued it, jaw set. “Loki is
king, and he rules well and fairly, Father. I would not see that taken from him, not when he relishes it so much. And if he rules, I need not give up Jane, or my duty to Midgard.”

“What duty is that?”

“It is not only Jane who helped me when I was cast out – there are many I owe a debt of gratitude to, one I would see fulfilled.” He swallowed, trying to think of the words. He had never been as good at them as he knew he ought to be, but it had never been something he thought much of before. Now when he needed them he did not have the ones he felt were adequate, but he did his best. “Humans are different than we always thought, Father – there is heart in them that was not there long ago. They may not live as we do, but they should not be ignored.”

After sitting in silence for a while, Odin rose, and Thor did too. His father looked pensive, and he hoped that was a good sign. “We will talk more of this when your brother awakens, Thor.”

Before, Thor would have grown angry at so obvious a dismissal, and he did feel irritation begin to bubble up in his chest – why did his father not see what was right, what was necessary? Asgard had a ruler, Midgard needed a protector. Though he knew his displeasure showed on his face, he kept it to himself as best he could, nodded his head, and left.

He spent the rest of his day as best he could. Jane and his mother had disappeared, and when he asked after them in the Healing Rooms, he was told that they had gone to talk to Eir and would see nobody. He looked in on Sif and his brother, but she had fallen asleep, her head pillowed on her arm and her hand still grasping Loki’s, so he let them be. All of Asgard seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for the aftermath of the battle to be determined so that it could exhale. The Tesseract was safely locked in the Vault; Surtur was dead. But their king lay asleep, and their old king had awakened, and nobody seemed to know how to respond.

*  

“…if…?”

Her eyes fluttered open slowly. Sif didn’t even remember falling asleep, could only think of a wave of weariness that overtook her suddenly. It was nothing to be ashamed of – she had fought a battle and won, she had been up most the night watching Loki sleep, it was only expected for her to be more than a little groggy.

“…Sif?”

His eyes were barely open, but his head was tipped toward her, his thumb slowly rubbing over her knuckles; she could feel his scabs dragging against her skin, but didn’t care, completely awake now. He was still pale, and there was little enough strength in his grip… but he was here.

Loki wet his lips, looking at her. “I had a dream,” he rasped. “I—I let go, and all around me was the void, but I was not alone, they were there—”

He closed his eyes in pain, and Sif pressed her lips together, reaching with her free hand and laying it upon his cheek. “It was only a dream,” she murmured. “You are awake now.” She smiled then, unable to contain it. “You are awake.”

Loki drew his hand out of hers and raised it to touch her lips, trace the shape of her face. He smiled too. “I am,” he replied, and then grimaced. “Water?”

She pulled away, pouring a flagon of the chilled water that had been left in a pitcher on a nearby table and bringing it back. Loki tried to sit up, but his arms would not support him when he did. Sif
sat closer, slipping an arm under his shoulders and lifting him up to rest his head against her shoulder so he could take the water in small sips, leaning back when he was done.

“You were an idiot to exhaust yourself so completely,” she told him. Loki just smiled at her.

The sound of running footsteps outside the room made her slide away a bit, arranging the pillows so Loki could sit up a little more just as Eir, Jane, and Frigga burst through the hangings. Sif had never seen the master healer and the old queen so flushed and lacking composure, and stepped aside to let them both in close to Loki’s bedside. He seemed almost embarrassed at the attention, but wearily allowed Eir to poke and prod at his wounds, and let his mother press her hand too his forehead and chest.

She glanced over at Jane. Something seemed different about her; there was a small smile dancing around the corners of her mouth, maybe that was it, there had been too few genuinely happy smiles here of late. Or perhaps it was something else, something in the way she held herself…

Catching her eye, Jane smiled again and shook her head in answer to Sif’s unasked question. “Later,” she whispered. “It’ll keep. For now, I think we need to get Thor in here.”

* * *

Thor hated being idle, and so he had tried his best to fill the remainder of his day in the training yards. It felt an age since he had been there, and on the sands surrounded by wooden dummies, he picked up weapon after weapon and ran through what he could remember of his training forms. But instead of helping him it only served to frustrate him, and eventually he dropped the sword he held and called Mjolnir to his hand, smashing the dummies into kindling.

It was there, standing in the middle of the sands now littered with splinters of wood and panting through bared teeth, that the guard found him.

“My prince,” and Thor’s head whipped around. To his credit, the guard’s flinch was barely visible around the palpable air of excitement he radiated. “My prince, it is your brother the king—“

“Is something amiss? Has something happened?”

The guard could not contain his smile, full of relief. “My lord, your brother is awake.”

* * *

When Thor burst into the room and had to be restrained from sweeping his brother up into a bear hug, it began to feel very crowded. Junior healers kept peeking in or bringing things for Eir and Frigga. Loki endured it all and seemed to enjoy the attention, though when the others’ backs were turned, Sif saw him close his eyes and take a deep breath or two and knew he was tiring.

Frigga was now sitting by him, getting him to eat and watching like a hawk as he swallowed every spoonful of broth she held up for him (they had tried giving him the spoon to let him feed himself, but his hand had shook so badly Frigga had sighed and plucked it back). Thor was fidgeting by the side of the bed and talking of the realm and its business, all energy now that his brother was awake and, according to Eir, going to recover fully, and Jane was at his side with her arm tucked comfortably around his waist.

“I am certain I can manage it myself now,” Loki was saying as Frigga held another spoonful up. She eyed him until he sighed and leaned forward to swallow it down. “I am not a child.”

“You had to be helped up to sit,” Frigga replied briskly. “I am your mother, and you will listen to me
until I am certain your sense of self-preservation is back to its usual place.”

“Your recovery will be quicker this way.” Sif had taken up her seat on his other side again. If anyone noticed that she occasionally reached out and brushed her fingertips over his wrist, none of them said anything about it. “Eir has said you are not to overexert yourself—“

“A thing we all ought to observe.”

Conversation stopped as soon as Odin walked into the room. Loki had just taken a mouthful of broth, but at the sight of his father he had frozen in place, eyes like chips of ice as he slowly swallowed his mouthful and sat back against the pillows.

“It seems I am not the only one to awaken recently,” he said. Sif looked between her husband and Odin warily. Her hand had gone to grip Loki’s wrist now, and she could feel the tension in him, through his exhaustion and weakness.

Odin lowered his gaze. “Our parting was not on the terms I wished it to be,” he said. “You are angry at me, and perhaps rightfully so, but I will stand by my decision.”

“Husband, now is not the time,” Frigga began, but Odin held up a hand. She stopped, but her brows drew together slightly. For a long time Odin and Loki stared at each other, both weakened still, both unwilling and unable to fight on any ground.

“Did I not tell you that you were born to be a king?” Odin said softly at last. “You have ruled well, my son. We have much to talk about, you and your brother and I, but you have done well.” Perhaps it was his condition, but Sif thought she felt Loki relax just a fraction under her hand.

It was at that point that Frigga very deliberately let the spoon clatter back into the bowl of broth as she stood. “While I am as aware as all of you that there is much that needs airing in this family,” she said, “Loki has only just awakened from a very grave state, and I will not let you put him back with your bullheaded determination to prove yourself right, husband, nor you with your well-intentioned hovering, Thor. You need your own time to rest and recover.” And even though Odin was giving her a very neutral look that could only mean a heated discussion was coming, and Thor was looking rebellious, Frigga made a shooing gesture with her hand. “All of you, out. I am certain Eir would agree if she were with us. Loki needs rest, and I intend to see him get it. Out!”

Jane took Thor by the hand and led him out herself, and after a very intense conversation of looks and expressions, Odin left the room as well. Frigga set the bowl back on its tray and put the two water flagons back by the pitcher. “I will see to it that more of this is made and sent up myself, but that will be later, and it is just as healthful cold as it is hot. Sleep, my son. And you, Sif, you both deserve the respite.”

Then she left too, untying the door hanging and letting it close and muffle the noise from the rest of the Healing Rooms, and they were alone.

Sif went to say something, but a glance at Loki’s drooping eyelids was enough to make her close her mouth and smile wearily. “Your mother’s advice is sound,” she told him. “Rest, and I will rest with you so your dreams are not so dark.”

Loki shifted his hand so she was no longer gripping his wrist but his palm, and being mindful of her own wounds, Sif kicked off her slippers and stretched out along the length of his body, pulling one of the furs over them both.

His voice was rough with sleep when he spoke, head somewhere above her, but there was a note of
vulnerability in it that made her fingers tighten. “You will be here when I wake?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Loki smiled – she heard it in his voice, rather than saw it – and seemed to settle a bit, though he held her as tightly as he could. “That is good.” He was asleep before she could respond, and not long after that, Sif drifted off too.

* 

“It seems,” Odin said, “My absence has made you much bolder, wife.”

Frigga barely glanced up from her weaving, but he could tell by the tension in her back and the short, jerky way she moved, not her usual fluid grace. She had been short with him since this particular discussion had begun, as soon as he had closed the door and laid out what he meant to do. “You banish our first son,” she replied coolly. “You nearly ruin the other, and by the grace of Yggdrasil I had a way to put a stop to that. Now you propose to rip away the things they value, the people who make them happy? I do not call this boldness on my part, husband, I call it lack of vision on yours.”

“You knew my intent for Sif and—“

“—and I never agreed with it. I was not as blind as you, to ignore that it was the other son who looked upon her as a woman and warrior both, when Thor may as well have had a second brother in Sif. Oh, I do not doubt he occasionally paid attention,” and her voice turned fonder, “For he has eyes to see that she is beautiful as she is versed in battle, but they are friends, Odin, of the sort who would not benefit from that change to marriage. They are not us.”

He could not refute it, nor could he doubt that Frigga had more authority to speak when it came to marriages and matchmaking. But things had to be done to ensure preservation of the realm. “If he weds this mortal…”

Frigga did sigh at that, her hands stilling. “I do worry,” she agreed quietly. “Do not mistake me, Odin, I worry for the happiness of our sons as I worry about this realm and its people. I know that if she does not become one of us then she will eventually die, and a part of our son will die with her. But what purpose would it serve not to grant him what time they have? If she is mortal and yet our son has given his heart to her, how would it hurt to let them be happy? We are not cruel people, husband. We do things that are unfavorable to many but benefit all, but we do not coldly make such decisions.”

Odin remained silent, hands folded at the small of his back as he stared out into Asgard’s night, and after a time he heard the rustling of his wife’s skirts as she rose and came to slip her hands into his, her cheek against his shoulder.

“I have not slept long in the way our people mark time,” he said at last. “But it seems even that was long enough to send the realms on a different course entirely. With Laufey killed in the battle I would see Loki on Jotunheim’s throne, but I do not think that will come to pass. All those years I kept the truth from him, groomed him for kingship without thinking it might be Asgard’s throne he sits…”

“I think perhaps it is for the better,” Frigga murmured in reply. “We have raised two fine sons, husband. We have raised two leaders.”

“They are so young.”

“So were we, when we came into power. They have it in them.”
He sighed, gnarled hands tightening their grip on his wife’s. “I suppose it is the nature of children to derail the plans their elders have,” he said at last, and wondered, not for the first time, how out of touch he truly was with the realms.

*Loki woke before Sif the next morning – not uncommon, actually, though the way she was still curled against his side rather than sprawled across him surely was. He looked at her tucked under his arm, looked at the dark circles under her eyes. Sif was exhausted still, and he would not wake her.

He had not held much back – less than he had intended to keep to himself anyway, and none of it had been potentially relevant to the situation at hand – as they had made their plan, and now that things had more or less gone the way he had anticipated, there was no need to tell her. Thor had been a fount of information for him when he had been in before, and despite the sluggishness of his mind and body, Loki had filed it all away, knowing he would soon have the strength again to properly analyze it. The strings he had not wanted to leave hanging were now snipped, though the one concerning thing was—

“I can hear you thinking, husband.”

Loki shifted his head – it hurt much less this morning, not like when he had woken yesterday and thought perhaps his brain was trying to pound its way out of his skull – and looked at the top of Sif’s head, which was all he could see at this angle. “How long has it been since we wed? Are you still surprised by my ability to lose myself in thought so easily?”

“Not surprised.” Sif shrugged his arm off her shoulders and sat up, eyeing him critically. “You still look awful.”

“I nearly died,” Loki pointed out.

“Your wit clearly has not.”

“I have taken pains to ensure my wit endures forever.”

“Or that we have to endure it forever.”

“You make it sound like a chore.”

“Dealing with you is a chore.” Something flickered across her face though, worry and fading fear and anger and more, and she suddenly reached over and gripped his wrist. “Do not put me through that again, Loki. Do you hear me? Never again.”

He was fairly certain she did not just mean his brush with death when she spoke, not with the way her eyes had hardened to flint and brown-green steel, and ducked his head in agreement. His free hand came over to cover hers on his wrist. “I will do everything in my power to keep it from you,” he said, and meant it. Seeing her thus made his chest ache uncomfortably. His words seemed to satisfy her at least, because she eased her grip and smiled a little.

They talked a little more, interrupted only by a master healer coming in to check them both over. Sif’s wounds were well on the way to healing, the healer said, and when she looked over Loki’s she seemed pleased as well, and said he could get out of bed today if he chose.

When she left, Loki nudged Sif aside and stood shakily, taking a moment before hobbling over to where clothes had been laid out for him, soft trousers and a black shirt to go under the green suede tunic. She watched him beadily.
“I suppose you think you are going somewhere,” she said, standing to help him pull the tunic over his head so he didn’t tug his scabs too much.

“A bath,” he said, after a moment’s thought to lay out his plans in his mind. “In our room, not here. Then my study. Then Midgard.”

“No.”

“To which part?”

“All of it, Loki!”

“The healer said I could get out of bed, and I feel just fine—“

“And who was it just reminding me he nearly died?” Sif grabbed one of his arms and slipped the leather-and-cloth bracer on over his sleeve, adjusting the buckles so it was snug. “But I suppose your stubbornness is far stronger than your sense. If you put yourself back in here with exhaustion, it will be your own head.” She sat back and watched him finish slipping his boots on. When they left, she was at his side, moving slowly and stiffly yet. They looked at each other once they were out of the Healing Rooms and laughed.

“What a pair we are,” Sif said as they made their way up a flight of stairs. “You hobbling about like a graybeard, and me still like an old grandmother.”

“Silver hair goes just as well with green as black does,” Loki replied, but reached for her. It took Sif a moment, but she worked out what he was about to do and started squirming to get away.

“Oh, Loki, don’t,” she began, and there was more than a little worry in her voice, “You are going to put yourself right back—“

It did hurt, more than he anticipated, and when they reappeared in their bedchamber Loki staggered and caught himself on Sif. She glared at him even as she steadied him, but muttered something that sounded like on your own head and stalked off to go see that her armor and weaponry was properly taken care of.

“See?” he called after her, but only got a noncommittal grunt in response and sighed. At least that is back to normal, he thought to himself, and went to take a bath.

* 

Eir put her foot down about Loki leaving the realm until the next day – she wasn’t pleased with him leaving her care as it was, but as she told Sif while Loki was dressing again in the room, it did not matter how cunning they were, men were stubborn and had their own ideas that made no sense whatsoever to anyone with a brain in their head.

Thor, Jane, Darcy, and Sofia the linguist returned that afternoon, though. Jane said she wanted to speak to Thor in private about something, and that they would tell SHIELD and the others (Thor had said they called themselves the Avengers, a name that made little sense to Sif but Thor had seemed pleased by it so she had let it go) that most of the Asgardian royal family would be arriving on the morrow, and as Loki only made it through part of the celebratory feast before he had to retire, eyes glassy with pain, Sif thought it a wise decision to stay behind.

It had been good to see him among the others, though. The Warriors Three had come up and clapped Loki on the back soundly (ignoring the startled jerks from the guards around the room, who did not care that the Warriors Three had been companions to the king and queen for hundreds of years) and
congratulate him on his cunning, and of course all three had gotten up to dramatically recount the tales of Sif the Dragon Queen at least five times that night. Their reaction to Loki, though, that had been surprising for her. They had always been polite with him, respectful of his station, but just as Loki had never really paid them much mind when he did not have to, they had done the same. Now they and others in the court sought him out, praised him for the things that they had once derided. Loki had seemed amused in some way by this, but even though he had at last asked her quietly to make their excuses, she could see he enjoyed the attention.

In the morning she woke up in her usual sprawl, with new pink skin showing over the worst of her hurts and the smaller ones barely even showing as scars. An experimental stretch met with little resistance or pain, and even Loki moved about with more of his usual fluid grace as they prepared themselves.

When they arrived in Midgard – Sif and Loki in their full formal armor in the front, Odin behind – it was not in a desert, or on the ship they had left behind, but a city to rival Asgard by the sound of it. At their backs, a grand fountain in the plaza below stood above a crowd of people, all craning their necks to look up at what was going on above.

“Central Park,” Loki said. “Stark picked the place, if I am not mistaken?”

Standing in the semicircle just in front of them Tony shrugged. “You aren’t. Do you ever hate being right?”

Loki put on his best and most confused expression. “No, should I?”

“I never do. Of course, I hate thinking that I’m wrong about someone I—“

“Can we not get into this out here?” Natasha cut in suddenly, a hand to her ear. “We’re too exposed, and SHIELD’s perimeter isn’t impenetrable.”

“The Avengers are standing right here.”

“And half of us are either unarmed or not carrying the kind of weaponry necessary to protect everyone here.”

Natasha ended up prevailing and there was a short wait while the streets were cleared along their route. Loki took the chance to sidle up to Thor – who had been looking distinctly more pleased than he had any right to be in the situation – and asked him what exactly he was grinning at. Thor got that pinched look of his that meant he had a secret he desperately wanted to tell but had been sworn to silence on.

“Jane will tell you when you reach Stark Tower,” he said at last. “She would be very upset if I said anything to you about it before she had a chance to, and since Father is here as well….”

“If it is that the two of you intend to marry, that is hardly any secret anymore.”

“Oh, no.” The grin was back, and Loki’s suspicions grew. “No, it is not that.”

Then they were gestured into the row of black SUVs waiting for them, and there was little enough talking done in the seven-minute ride between the park and Stark Tower, where they went down a ramp and pulled into a harshly-lit concrete garage. Sif paused as they were getting out of the cars, watching as Steve rolled up on his motorcycle and parked it. Loki gave it a glance and went to turn away, but she grabbed the lapel of his jacket and hauled him back.

“I want it,” she told him, looking for all the world like a hunter sighting prey for the first time. Loki
gave the motorcycle another look.

“I am certain something can be done,” he told her.

They were shown their rooms for the duration of their stay – Tony had given over a whole floor of the building for a guest suite and had had it converted in the space of a few days – and then Sif and Loki were taken up to a conference room in the penthouse. It was beautiful – wood-paneled, comfortable seating, given an unparalleled view by the floor-to-ceiling windows – but the faces of the Avengers that took up places around the table, along with Fury, Hill, and Coulson, were less than cheery.

“So,” Tony said, leaning on the back of a chair and leveling his gaze at Loki. “You, big fella, have got some ‘splaining to do.”

Loki took a seat (not as carefully as he ought to have, it tugged on one of the remaining wounds on his body and he hid a grimace) and met Tony’s eyes. “Do I?”

“You pull a really bad joke on all of us, then bring giant flaming aliens to our planet, then come crawling back saying you want to make nice.” Tony looked around the table, eyebrows raised. “I think all of us want to hear why.”

Steve gave Tony a quelling look, folding his arms on the table. “It doesn’t make much sense to us,” he added. “Why the big show?”

He felt the eyes of everyone at the table on him, and took a breath before he spoke. Let them think it was to collect himself; it would be better in the long run that way. “It was part of the plan,” he said. “I could not count on all of you to be able to act on command – at least, I could not count on Thor —“

“Brother—“

Sif shrugged. “He has a point, Thor, you are worse at dissembling than I.”

“—and if he was not believable then it would be easy for the performances of the rest of you to be called into question. I did not know if Surtur would be watching; I had to assume he would be.” Not a lie; Loki had no illusions about being immediately drawn into Surtur’s inner circle, or that Surtur had designs to kill him upon receiving the Tesseract. “It had to be believable.”

“You did all that just because you thought some of us wouldn’t reach your acting standards?” Clint asked. He looked skeptical, until Tony gave Steve a very pointed look. Clint shrugged. “Got me there.”

Loki cut back in. “Too, Surtur is a creature of grand gestures and arrogance, and so like most with such a bent, he expects those around him to be the same. Luckily for the rest of you, I had no qualms about that part. I made him think what he wanted to think, see what he wanted to see, and used it against him.”

“It really was just a show,” Bruce said.

Loki spread his hands. “As you say.”

They did not know the rest of it, nor would they ever. Loki did not have any illusions about the kinds of people here, either, for he knew the types his brother attracted; he had read of them, watched them interact, watched them fight, and like he had always done had determined their usefulness to him. Singly, they were powerful, but together, they were a force to be reckoned with, and he had needed
them together. They had made a statement, as he had intended (and as he was certain Fury had intended as well, there was a low, smug light in the other man’s face), and had made their presence on the board well known. Time to roll the dice on the next part.

“The other realms,” he said, “They are not like Asgard; some are friendly, but most will not see you in the same way as I might. Surtur was, as you might say, a very big fish, but he is not the only big fish, nor is he the biggest. And many smaller powers together can surpass a greater one alone. A show was necessary to show not only my commitment, but also that you were not weak, that you would defend yourselves if attacked. Though you are not on par with the might of other worlds.”

There was silence in the room then, everyone thinking. Fury finally spoke up. “SHIELD would be glad to ally—"

“No,” Sif cut in, before even Loki could speak. He gave her a surprised look, one he didn’t even have to feign, but she was too busy watching Fury with her lips pressed tightly together, and Loki could not fault her. He had warned her of the possibility Fury would do as he had but she had not believed him. Sif did not hold a grudge as well as Loki himself did, but she did not easily forgive and forget either. Fury would have to earn her respect, just as everyone else did.

Fury’s eyebrows rose. “You don’t want to ally Asgard and Earth?”

“No through SHIELD.” Sif took a breath. “I have read something of the way your realm is governed. It is… much different than Asgard, but I think it would be more beneficial to all if we worked directly with the leaders of your government and the leaders of other countries, rather than allow one group to control it.”

Fury’s face had gone carefully neutral, but Loki smiled at Sif. Most did not give her mind the credit it deserved. “As wise as you are deadly,” he told her.

Sif gave him a look and said “Flattery gets you nowhere, husband,” but he could see the corners of her mouth twitching.

“My lady makes a fine point, and I am in agreement with her,” Loki said to the rest. “Your offer is most appreciated, Fury, all the same. We will, of course, liaise with you in matters of security. That does seem to be your area of expertise.”

It sounded innocuous enough, but nobody could miss the flash of white teeth from Loki to Fury, or the way Fury’s eye narrowed briefly before he replied. “It’s important to play to your strengths,” he said.

“Of course it is. Certainly we will want to sit down and formally write out these terms.” Loki sat back in his chair. “I would hate for there to be any misunderstandings in future. But it can surely wait – there is much in this place to see, and more to talk about, and we have only just arrived.”

A meeting was set for the next day, but before everyone could disperse Jane poked her head in and grinned at Thor. “Are you all done?”

That gleeful look was back on Thor’s face, and Loki narrowed his eyes as Jane went to join him, lacing her fingers with his.

“What in the Nine is going on with you?” Sif asked. “You have both been floating about for days.”

“We have an announcement to make,” Thor began.

Tony snorted “If it’s that the jock’s fallen in love with the nerd and they’re getting married—“ he
caught Thor’s blank look and sighed, running a hand over his face. “Continue.”

“I guess you all can expect wedding invitations in the mail eventually, but it’ll be a while.” Jane grinned suddenly. “I’m pregnant.”

*

Mortals, Odin realized, were nothing like he had known.

Jane had been one matter – Jane and her assistant and the linguist who, according to his wife, had to be pulled bodily from the archives. He could understand exceptional individuals. But as he stood before a transparent screen, watching accounts of the recent deeds of these Avengers and those who supported them, Odin began to think that perhaps he was wrong about the realm as a whole.

“Pretty awesome, huh?”

They were fearless, for one thing, or at least some of them were. Darcy was one of them, standing beside him watching the videos play back. Most would tremble before him, and Asgardians would kneel; she just looked at him from behind her glasses as though he was any other person.

“I did not think there was such strength in those of Midgard,” he said. “Having news brought is different than seeing in person. I begin to think I have been too long away from realms other than my own.”

“Can I just say something?” When Odin gestured for her to go on, Darcy took a deep breath. “Asgard is great. I mean that. It’s a freakin’ alien civilization, its shiny magic highway makes Jane go nuts, it produces really attractive men and women, it’s got more history and more knowledge in it than any of us puny mortals would know what to do with. But... it’s all focused inward. You don’t know anything about the rest of us because you don’t want to know. You think what you saw a thousand years ago holds true still, and I guess in some ways you’d be right – it’s different for you guys, you’re all basically immortal. But a thousand years for humans? That’s a really long time. We’ve changed, we’ve grown up. We have heroes, too.” She pointed at the screen. “And not just the ones in costumes.”

After parsing out some of the words she’d used, Odin gave Darcy a measuring look. He could see she was nervous, anyone could, but she kept her eyes on him and did not look away.

“What would you suggest?”

“Get outside,” she replied, after a moment. “Go talk to people. Don’t just sit up in your castle in the sky and think about it. Go see how things have changed.”

Odin looked back at the screen. “Perhaps,” he murmured.

“I mean, it’s up to you. But I think it’s a good idea.” Darcy crossed her arms. “Anyway, Loki asked me to find you. He and Thor want to talk to you. It sounded pretty important.”

He had an idea what it was about, if the two of them were together, and between them and Darcy’s words, Odin was beginning to get a plan of his own. “Tell them I will return presently,” he said. “I need a little more time to myself. Thank you for your candor, Lady Darcy.”

“I’m no lady,” she said, but grinned and bobbed through a curtsy anyway. “And I think everyone should have someone to tell them exactly what they need to hear, not just what they want to hear. Especially if they’re a leader.”
“Would that more in my court had your sense.”

Darcy left, and Odin watched after her for a while, many thoughts passing through his mind.

*

Darcy sagged against the wall in the elevator. “You’re nuts,” she muttered to herself. “Insane. First you go up against Nick Fury, now you go for the extra point and go after the other one-eyed dude. Darcy, you are getting crazy.”

She was pressed into the corner, dramatically clutching her heart… so of course the elevator stopped before her floor, the doors opened, and Clint Barton stared at her from the elevator lobby. He looked adorably confused at what he thought was probably a heart attack in progress. They stared at each other until the doors began to close, and between him sticking an arm between them and Darcy lunging for the Door Open button, he made it in.

“What the hell happened to you?” he asked, hitting the floor he wanted. Darcy rolled her head along the wall.

“I spoke my mind to Odin,” she moaned. “I’m going to be struck down by lightning.”

“Wrong Norse god.” Clint kept his composure for all of thirty seconds before he broke into a grin. “Someone needed to say something. Good for you for being the one to do it.”

She couldn’t help but grin back at him. Being complimented by a guy with arms like Clint’s apparently still had the same effect. “Thanks. Off to save the world?”

“Practice. I’m not dressed for world-saving.”

The elevator dinged and he left, and Darcy sighed. Darcy, she thought to herself, You’re an idiot too.

*

When Odin arrived back to the guest floor, Loki and Thor were alone in the central common area, talking. For a minute he let himself slow, looking at them. He could remember the first time he had held each one of his sons, and though they were both thousands of years old and had been through trials and tribulations aplenty, Odin could not but see those babes, those small children running to him for stories and gifts after a trip.

They saw him coming and broke off their conversation, both turning to face him. There was a determined set to both their faces – so they had decided to put up a united front.

“Three kings,” he said as they all took a seat around a carved wooden table. “One of them heir to two realms.”

Loki did not visibly bristle, but his eyes were hard again. “Jotunheim is no more my realm than Midgard,” he said. “After spending a life being told I am Asgardian, it is not so easy to cast aside, Allfather.”

Thor shot Loki a disapproving look – perhaps not as united a front as to be in agreement on all things, but close enough. “And I am no king,” he added. “Not yet. I have fulfilled the enchantment you laid upon Mjolnir, but I am no fit king for Asgard. I would remain here with Jane—”

“You think only of yourself still?”
Thor’s face grew stony. “I love Jane Foster,” he said slowly. “She bears my child. I will not leave her. It would be dishonorable, and it would bring shame upon our House.”

Odin sat back. That Jane was pregnant he hadn’t known – well, he hadn’t been certain of, anyway. That certainly complicated matters. “More shame than is already there, with you having an illeg—”

Thor was getting to his feet, teeth grinding in his jaw, when Loki sighed and reached up, putting a hand on his brother’s arm and yanking him back down into his seat. He had bristled too though, lips compressed to a thin line. “Thor and I have been discussing the matter at some length. Jane Foster naturally has her own very emphatic opinions on it. It would be handled.”

“The people would never accept a half-human.”

“As they would never have accepted me for their king?” Loki smiled, but it was frosty. “They call me the quicksilver king, do you know, Allfather? I am certain they meant it as an insult, but it is hardly untrue, and I have made it my strength. They cheered me at last night’s feast. Now,” and had Loki been younger, less self-assured, Odin would have had him punished for the insolent glitter in his eyes, “Tell me again that Asgard will only have you or Thor as their king.”

The arguing went on for some time before they realized they were getting nowhere. The sun had begun to dip down in its afternoon trek, the streets below starting to gather shadows, when they all sat back, glaring at each other.

“It seems,” Loki said far too evenly, “That we three have reached an impasse.”

“I would see this resolved before long.” Thor had his arms crossed over his chest. Odin simply looked tired.

“If there were, perhaps, another party, a mediator,” he supplied. And, after a moment, it was Thor who lit up.

“I believe,” Thor said with a smile, “I know a scholar of politics, someone who might be of service.”

* * *

In the end it had taken remarkably little convincing for Darcy to sit down with her laptop and help them work things out, and despite protests from the others, Thor insisted she was a scholar of politics and that she was the one he trusted to do this, and after she’d grinned in a way eerily similar to Loki as she typed out something he had suggested, he seemed to warm up to her considerably. It had helped, as the three of them had shaken the tower with their yelling.

The document was officially called the Succession Accords, and it took the better part of the rest of the day to work through. With the city lights of New York City as a backdrop, the next several decades of Asgardian rule were outlined, and succession after that laid out. It was imperfect, but at least, as each one of them signed their agreement and pressed their personal seals to the drops of wax, they had come away with equal grievances.

Loki would remain king; Thor would spend the intervening years learning the statecraft he ought to have learned as a boy, preparing himself to rule after his time on Earth was ended.

“Jane and I talked about it, last night,” he said quietly to Loki as they both watched Odin press his own signet ring into the golden wax. “She does not want to give up her mortality, and as she explained it, I could see her reasoning.”

“You are giving up something you have wanted since we were boys.” Darcy was collecting the
sheets of paper now, making a show of sliding them into the folio that someone had run out and
gotten for them.

“I have much to learn,” Thor replied. “Perhaps you will be more interesting than our tutors.”

“Is that a challenge, brother?”

“Perhaps it is.”

“Hardly a fair one.”

“I have changed,” Thor said simply, more serious than the smile on his face let on. “The field may be
more level than it was before.”

*

It took all of twelve hours for someone (accusations were levied against Tony, though he vehemently
denied having any hand in it) to rename the Accords “The Darcy Declaration.” For all his
impassioned denials of involvement, Tony declared this name to be better, and would refuse to
acknowledge the other one unless pressed.

The negotiations for Asgard’s agreements with SHIELD and the United States government took
much longer, and involved a lot more irritation for all parties. Sif was finding Fury as difficult to deal
with as Loki did, and would often return to their bedroom swearing and calling for her glaive. She
took little comfort in the fact that it seemed like Loki’s own progress with the president (who, Loki
had to admit, was tolerable for a mortal despite being the head of a ridiculously overcomplicated and
inefficient system of governance) and his advisors was just as slow. At least in his case it was less
that they were asking for things that Loki was unwilling to concede presently, so much as they could
not agree amongst themselves what it was that they wanted in the first place.

Over all of it, though, the weight of what part Odin had taken in the Accord hung heavy upon the
shoulders of the Asgardians. It had been clear from the start that his time upon the throne was ended
no matter who replaced him upon it, a point of displeasure that had nearly had the three of them
flying apart. But a civil war in Asgard on the heels of the one only days concluded was something
none of them had wanted, and when Odin had wearily (at least, he had sounded weary) made his
suggestion, the brothers had agreed it was best.

“Midgard has their tales of my travels among them, disguised as a mortal,” he said. “And after so
long it seems that I no longer recognize the realms. I think perhaps it is time I refamiliarize myself.”

Loki, who had eyed the Allfather speculatively the whole time he spoke, had drummed a knuckle on
the table pretending to think on it before nodding once. “I think that might be wise, Father,” he had
said. And whatever Odin calculated and schemed on his own, there had been that flicker of delight at
hearing Loki call him father and Loki could not deny that, seeing it, he had felt a little lighter.

The mood in the guest suite was quiet, the night Odin left. He had adopted the guise of an elderly
mortal, and for Sif, it was strange to see the king she had served for so long looking so… human.
Thousands of years he had sat upon the throne and handed down judgments, always a figure aloof
from the rest of them, and now he stood before them in trousers and a tweed coat in the mortal style,
a simple black eyepatch in place of the gilt one. He even leaned on a cane, though he did not need to.
It was, he explained to her over glasses of strange Midgard wine, part of the show.

“Much like the face one wears for the court,” Odin said, peering at her so that she felt small again.
“Something it seems you have learned well.”
Sif looked down into her glass. The wine was weaker than she was used to, but it had a good flavor, and the deep red of it reminded her of her own favored colors. “I am not the kind of actress who truly excels at court,” she replied. “Though I do not think being a warrior and being a queen are so different anymore.”

Odin chuckled at that. “Truly they are not,” he agreed. “I watched, as I slumbered. I watched you and my son wed, I watched as you—“ he could not keep a smile off his face here “—took him to task for his lies of omission. Those were as much my fault as his…”

“Loki knew,” Sif told him. “Loki knew, and said nothing to me. It was his choice, as it was mine to forgive him.” Odin said nothing for a time after that, and Sif dropped her eyes again as the silence wore on.

“You heart is a warrior’s heart,” he said at last. “Steadfast, honorable, dutiful… and compassionate. The things that make you so invaluable to Asgard’s defense make you just as invaluable to its people. And to my son.”

They both looked over to where the brothers were talking quietly with Jane. Or at least, Jane and Loki seemed to be talking and Thor mostly listening. Loki caught Sif’s eye, raised an eyebrow. She nodded slightly to tell him everything was all right, and he returned the nod and immersed himself in his conversation again. When Sif looked back at the Allfather, it was to see him smiling unguardedly, the corner of his eye crinkled.

“When I awoke, I thought for a time of dissolving your marriage,” he said. “Offering you the choice to free yourself of the burden of the crown, for I know you never asked for it, never wanted it – though I had hoped to see you with it one day, after you could be shown its benefits. But it seems you and Loki share it well.”

“I would have been insulted at the offer, Allfather.”

“Oh?”

“Your son…” she looked at Loki again, a small smile on her face. “He is maddening and proud, as easy to pin down as an eel, fiercely intelligent, devoted to his causes, and stubborn as a rock, and if he does not make me throw up my hands in exasperation at least once a day, I begin to wonder for his health. It is enough to make anyone, any lady with her wits, jump at your offer. But for all his trials, I would be insulted, and believe me when I say that this is only one of the reasons why.” Sif finished her wine and set the glass carefully on the table. “Because War does not give up, and it matters not what it fights for. Or who.” She stood and bowed, hand fisted over her heart. Odin watched her with that piercing, faraway look in his eye again.

“You are a fine match for my son,” he said at last, quietly. Sif’s smile turned wolfish.

“In that, Allfather, we are agreed.”

They bid him goodbye; Thor’s embrace warm and heartfelt, Loki’s less so if only for lack of experience. Odin embraced Sif, too, and kissed Jane’s hand, and then just like that, he was gone. It seemed anticlimactic to Sif, for such a powerful being to vanish so easily and simply, but under the hand she had tucked through Loki’s arm, she could feel her husband relax. It did not show much in his posture or on his face, but Sif smiled a little, knowing he had.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Jane said at last, “But I’m tired, and I’m going to bed. Being pregnant is hard work, and it’s barely even started.”
Thor watched her go with a mix of pride and adoration on his face. When she had shut the door to their bedchamber behind her, he turned his grin on them.

“She grows more beautiful by the day,” he said happily. “I had heard Mother and the other ladies speak of a glow that women with child have, but…”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Yes, brilliant as the sun.” Sif did not bother to hide her smile, and Loki gave her a dirty look; he had frequently and at length discussed his annoyance with Thor’s recent habit of waxing poetic over Jane.

“I am certain Sif would be radiant as well,” Thor continued, and Sif’s smile turned into a look of her own. “It would be well indeed if my child were to have a cousin – perhaps around Jane’s time, I have heard the both of you—”

“Never mind what you heard,” Loki muttered (he blamed an imperfectly cast muffling spell on emotions running high, as they were wont to do when he and Sif were apart for any length of time apparently), but Thor’s face had fallen slightly to see the shift in their expressions.

“Have I asked something wrong?”

“No, brother. But the truth of the matter is, I—“

“We,” Sif cut in.

“—we have spent much time musing upon parenthood, and childbearing, and the fact of the matter is that at this point in time—“

“We don’t want any.” Sif glared at the dregs of her wine.

“Perhaps in the future,” Loki added. “But neither of us feel so inclined at present.”

Thor looked confused. “Why not?”

“When you have spent months dealing with inquiries after your condition,” Sif told him, “Months listening to very pointed remarks about succession, having to politely decline dozens of herbal remedies, as though childlessness was some sort of malady that needed curing, when you have endured all that, Thor, you may perhaps understand why.”

Looking as though he had expected a puddle and gotten an ocean – which was to say, looking vaguely uncomfortable and unsure of how to respond without upsetting Sif more – Thor went with a polite smile and a nod. Loki took that as an appropriate cue.

“You should go rejoin your lady,” he said. “I, at least, intend to sleep.”

When they had changed for bed and slid under the soft covers, Loki shot a look sideways at Sif. She was holding one of the curious devices Stark had given them – a StarkPad, he called it – but not doing anything with it, simply staring off into the dark room with a pensive look on her face. She started when he gently plucked the thing from her hands and set it on the bedside table, and curled against his side when the lights dimmed the rest of the way.

“You are not even in this realm,” he murmured. Her hair was very soft under his fingers, and Loki let it slip through his hands, playing with it. It soothed them both, after all.

“Loki,” she said at last, “Do you suppose we will have children? Is it even possible? I have never heard of the mixing of Asgardian and Jotun.”
He had wondered on it himself; it had been on both of their minds much more after the Tesseract had made its tempting offer, but the court’s obsession with their ability to procreate had certainly kept it somewhere in their minds. A king was supposed to have an heir, after all. But the naturally low birth rate among Asgardians, coupled with their own differences, made him worry.

“I do not know,” he admitted, the words thick on his tongue. “I have never heard of such a thing myself, though I suppose it would be possible. Jotunn are not… ah, physically incompatible.”

“Aren’t you being coy,” Sif mumbled against his shoulder, but she was smiling. He stroked her back.

“Can you imagine us as parents, Sif, truly?” It was only mostly a joking question.

She wrinkled her nose. “Not at all. We are even less prepared than your brother.”

*That* led to wild speculation about their forthcoming niece or nephew, and when they slept, it was with smiles on their faces.

*The negotiations with the President were far from completely concluded but they recessed anyway that afternoon, having laid down the framework at least for an exchange of ideas and resources that benefitted both of them equally.*

The news that the President of the United States had been meeting with extraterrestrial royalty and negotiating an agreement had spread like wildfire. With the combination of other events – noticeable Bifrost arrivals near Albuquerque, the destruction of the SHIELD base, the bodies of fire giants left across Mexico that SHIELD containment teams were still cleaning up, and the incursion in Central Park, it would have been impossible to hide the fact that humans were not alone in the universe even had there not been Asgardians being dragged out of Stark Tower to coffee shops and sightseeing opportunities all over New York City. Darcy had taken her job very seriously.

Loki and Sif had returned to the tower after one such excursion to prepare for their formal introduction to the illustrious in the United States government, as well as to the leaders and representatives of other countries, and Loki was standing in the common area adjusting one of his golden bracers when Fury walked in with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He too was dressed well in an immaculate and crisp tuxedo, but the look on his face was hard as stone.

“I suppose you think we’re going to go along with this,” he said. Loki regarded him coolly.

“It would help your cause if you explained yourself.”

“Prior to the finalizing of this agreement between SHIELD and the Realm of Asgard, it shall be the responsibility of the Director to ensure that all Tesseract research is relinquished to the king, and his representative shall be allowed to make confirmation of such.” Fury’s voice had not had any shake in it as he’d read, but his displeasure didn’t need to be vocalized.

“You said, when first we spoke of the Tesseract, that your unwillingness to return it to its rightful place in Asgard was so that your realm was not left undefended,” Loki replied. “And in return, one of your bases was destroyed and your realm was attacked. You no longer have the Tesseract, and you have my brother to aid in your realm’s defense, along with your other heroes. It would be unwise to become greedy, Director. The research is useless without the cube to test theories that come from it. What is your disadvantage in turning it over?”

“What do I gain if I do?”
“An ally. I would think that it was obvious Asgard’s continued cooperation with SHIELD is contingent upon this.”

Fury pressed his lips together, reading the section again. “Who is your representative?”

“Your people send emissaries – ambassadors, correct? Between nations, to foster one’s own interests and to speak with the authority of one’s leader at times?”

“Thor is off the table. I won’t have his interests conflicted.”

“Oh, no, I was not thinking of Thor.” He turned; Darcy, already dressed in her own finest, was helping Sif with the intricacies of Midgard’s cosmetics, though they appeared to have finished and were laughing at some joke. “She will do.”

Fury’s lips pressed further together, if that were possible. “There is a vetting and appointment process for representatives here on Earth. Most are usually more… qualified.”

“I think you will find that Asgard does not operate upon the same rules as Midgard. Miss Lewis, if you please,” he called. Darcy looked like a deer caught by hunters, and held up her hands in a warding gesture, but Loki crooked a finger, and she sighed, picking up the long hem of her gown and coming over.

“Look, I just wrote out what I was told,” she said. “And it’s only because I was the only one Sif trusted, she didn’t want to bring in anyone else—“

“And that is why I am bestowing upon you a singular honor one no other mortal yet holds,” Loki told her, very quickly organizing his thoughts and speaking with only the very barest tilt of his lips in amusement. “Darcy Lewis, for your loyalty and services rendered to the throne of Asgard and to the House of Odin, for your bravery in the face of… unusual adversity, and your willingness to go beyond your experience, I, King Loki of the House of Odin, hereby proclaim you citizen of Asgard by right of deed, with all honors pertaining thereto. Do you accept this offer?”

Darcy’s mouth had fallen open. “I… uh… what?”

“It is a yes or no question.”

“I know, I know—uh, yes.”

“Then I grant you the title of Lady, and a place in the peerage of the court of Asgard.”

Fury’s eye had narrowed. “Your Majesty, what are you doing?” Loki ignored him.

“As a peer of the realm, you are expected to obey the will of your king, and to serve should he assign you a task to carry out. It has come to my attention that my queen and I require a representative in this realm, to speak for us and to ensure our interests here are preserved. You have shown exemplary skill in matters of state—“

“This is insane,” Darcy muttered. “I don’t even have a degree yet.”

“Do not interrupt your king.” Loki’s eyes were too bright with mischief to be displeased, though. “It is my will that you serve as Asgard’s emissary, and, when your education is complete, our ambassador to this realm.”

Darcy stared at him, apparently trying to work out if he was serious. “Are you nuts?” she asked at last.
“I sincerely hope not.”

“And you’re doing this to make the scariest man on the planet angry.” She rubbed her forehead, but he could see her starting to grin.

“You are intelligent,” Loki told her. “And remarkably brave, for one so young. You have no fear to speak your mind to those who are far older and hold more power than you. Any other choice might well be worse. Do you accept the will of your king?”

She waved a hand. “Fine. Fine. I accept.”

Loki turned a brilliant smile upon Fury. “Director Fury, allow me to introduce Lady Darcy Lewis, who speaks with the authority of the king and queen in this realm.”

“She’s just a kid,” Fury muttered.

“Do not discount her because of her age; there are courtiers who have held power for longer than my years who do not have half her fortitude. Unless you reject my decision?” Loki’s eyes were innocently rounded. “Though that would mean rejecting any agreement reached between our two realms—“

“—and I have endeavored to be so accommodating,” Sif added, walking over as she very carefully (and, he thought, somewhat pointedly) adjusted her crown to sit just so on her head. In a gown of emerald and shimmering gold, styled to look like scale mail across her torso and over one shoulder, she looked every inch a warrior queen. “The Lady Darcy is deserving of this honor. I would that you accept it.”

Fury looked between the two of them, and then to Darcy, who managed to straighten her back and not look terrified. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not if you wish so many of our arrangements to stand.”

“I would be displeased,” Sif added. “And I cannot imagine Thor would feel charitable.”

“Not at all.”

“So it’s no choice.” Fury gave them all one last look, but drew in a breath. “I’ll see that you’re set up with a security detail and offices, Ambassador Lewis.”

After he left, Darcy rounded on Loki. “You could have warned me!”

Loki shrugged. “Would it have been as effective if I had?”

She sighed dramatically and threw up her hands. “Whatever. Just… why me?”

“Well,” Loki said, “My father said that you effectively told him to go outside. That endeared you to me more than somewhat.”

Both Sif and Darcy gave him very level stares such that he knew they knew he wasn’t telling them the whole of it, but he simply spread his hands. “I believe we must make our way to this event, else we will be late. That would hardly be a good impression to make.”

Darcy was still muttering as she collected her clutch and left the room, but it took Loki a moment longer to conjure his helmet and settle it on his head, watching Sif out of the corner of his eye all the while. She was… a hundred words in a dozen languages crossed his tongue, but none of them
seemed adequate. Instead, he settled on, “You look queenly.”

As though remembering their wedding day, Sif smiled a little at him as she stepped in close, hands following the long, curving lines of his armor over his chest, curling her fingers under the edges to pull him down. Her voice was a hiss again, but there was no venom in it, no edge as there had been months ago. “That was the intention.”

“Then it was effective.”

Their kiss was long and slow and hot, and when they finally broke apart, it was but reluctantly. There was a certain promise in Sif’s eyes that made Loki forget his bloodline was in ice, not the fire of Asgard.

“Do you not know, dear husband?” she whispered against his lips, one last teasing brush before she stepped back, slipping her hand through his arm when he remembered himself and offered it. “I get what it is I desire.”

“Oh, I think I do know,” he said. “Shall we make our last night here a memorable one, my lady?”

* 

He fell, and all around him was the void.

Until it wasn’t.

He had never felt small, before, but when he stood and looked around him with eyes blurred from pain and the slow death of his body, all around him was space, and an endless field of rock and diffused light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Well, well. Something seems to have fallen through the cracks.”

He turned, but could not see the speaker clearly. They were only a huge, broad-shouldered shape against the darkness. If he looked, he could see the glint of strangely bright eyes.

“I… am—“

“I do not care who or what you say you are. I know.”

A second voice chimed in. “He reeks of the stars, my lord.”

“Of the Tesseract,” the first voice corrected.

He began to know fear again, and put his clawed hands in front of him. “I will tell you what I know of it, of who has it, where it is,” he said. Laughter greeted him.

“You know nothing we do not already,” the first speaker told him. “We see all that happens in the nine little realms you contain yourselves within. You are only a piece of flotsam washed up on our shores. But you may still serve a purpose for me.”

He felt relief. Then he felt nothing.

* 

The ride back to Central Park was short, but as before Sif pressed her face to the glass, watching the buildings go by. Midgard was truly different than she thought it had been; its people, the ones lining the streets and waving at the cars as they went by, they were different stronger, smarter, prouder. She
was glad she had been wrong about them, and put her window down to wave back, the wind blowing her hair back.

The cars pulled up in front of the fountain they had arrived at and everyone piled out. It was bittersweet, at least for her, to leave the people who had become fast friends with her. Natasha caught her eye and smiled a little, and Sif embraced her warmly.

“If you wish to visit Asgard, you have but to ask for Heimdall,” Sif told the redhead. “I will tell him to watch for you.”

“Not too often. I do have a reputation for sneakiness.”

“No, not too often.” They laughed.

Tony had one hip cocked and was eyeing Loki over his ridiculous purple sunglasses. “It’s a major holiday,” he was saying. “How can you not have heard of Christmas? You memorized the layout of a park you had never been to in a matter of minutes based on a throwaway reference and then led a bunch of flaming monsters through it, but you have no idea what Christmas is.”

“It is like Yule,” Thor supplied helpfully. “But not as long, and there is no hunt, and—“

Loki gave his brother a look. “I know what Christmas is.”

“And he was just screwing with me the entire time.” Tony threw up his hands. “I can’t deal with you. Get off my planet, but if you miss the First Annual Avengers Christmas Party I will personally hurt you.”

“Threatening a foreign head of state is a punishable offense by the standards of my realm,” Loki said conversationally. “But in my magnanimity I shall overlook it.”

“Yeah, you’re a true hero,” Tony muttered. “We promise to take care of your brother.”

“I have entrusted his care to Jane Foster already, and I think she will do a superior job of it.” Sif and Jane were talking off to one side; Jane kept running a hand over her stomach, though it was still flat. Loki wondered briefly what they were talking about with those smiles on their faces, but decided it was better that he not know, and instead went over to where Thor stood slightly off to one side. They stared at each other for a moment before Thor put a hand alongside Loki’s neck, a small smile on his face.

“I am going to miss you, my brother,” he said.

“You are expected to return on occasion, you realize,” Loki told him. “The document we three signed holds that you are to learn statecraft and occasionally actually practice it, in preparation for your own ascension to the throne. That and I expect Mother would be very put out if you did not bring her a grandchild to moon over.”

“I was there,” Thor replied dryly, but after a moment of fidgety silence, simply pulled Loki into a tight hug. After a pause, Loki returned it, not as awkwardly as the last time this had happened.

“You will come for Christmas?” Thor asked when they stepped back again, though his hand lingered on Loki’s neck. “You swear it?”

Loki reached up and mirrored his brother’s gesture, his hand pale against sun-warmed blond hair. “I think Sif will give me no choice in the matter. And I will have to ensure the plans for your wedding to Jane adhere to the rules of our House—“ he caught a look from Jane and quickly cleared his throat
“—but I am sure that whatever Jane intends will be splendid.”

They stood there a moment, smiling at each other, the most relaxed they’d been in each other’s presence in a long time. Then Loki’s eyes slid to one of the people standing behind Thor, and his smile faded, replaced by a distinctly haughty expression as he dropped his arm.

Fury stood by one of the SHIELD vehicles, a silver case in his hand. He had a sour expression on his face, mostly hidden. Maria Hill did not bother hiding her displeasure so well, arms crossed and hip cocked as she stood slightly behind Fury.

“Show me,” Loki told him imperiously.

Fury thumbed open the case and showed Loki the three hard drives slotted into the foam lining of the case, and the file folders slipped into the pocket under the lid. “All the Tesseract research done by you and our own team, along with anything else we could find,” he said, then paused, the corner of his mouth barely creasing upward. “Guess it might be better off with you, where we can’t use it.”

“Yes, it might be,” Loki replied. Fury snapped the case closed and turned it toward Loki, handle out. Loki took it. For a moment the two men watched each other, still pushing dominance, still backing down on equal footing when they turned away from each other. Fury leaned back against the car, and Loki vanished the case with a very insincere smile. “I am glad we could agree on this, Director.”

He went to stand beside Sif on top of the metal disc set into the brickwork, glancing up at the clouds beginning to fill the midafternoon sky as he did. With a brilliant flash of light and a rush of sound, they were taken into the Bifrost, and disappeared.

“So those are aliens,” Steve murmured. He was smiling.

“Not exactly The War of the Worlds,” Bruce said, “Then again, that’s probably a good thing.”

“Come on, gentlemen,” Tony said, putting on his very best strut as he made his way over to one of the staircases going down to the plaza below. “We have adoring fans to greet and take pictures with. Should be a cakewalk for you, Cap. Pepper—uh, thanks,” Tony said, as Pepper, who had been standing off to one side talking to some of the personnel who had come with them, reached into her purse and handed out Sharpies. “What would I do without you?”

“Probably not survive a week,” she replied without missing a beat. “Go have fun.”

“Don’t I always?” Tony turned, walking backwards a few steps so he could point one of the Sharpies at Thor. “Coming, Hercules?”

“I had better not,” Thor called back distractedly. He had other things on his mind.

As Natasha and Clint peeled off back toward the cars, Jane lingered behind. Thor was staring up into the sky still, at the vaguely circular cloud pattern that was quickly fading from view. She knew that look, and slipped her hands around one of his.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you okay with this? I know you agreed to it and helped work this out and all, but are you really okay?”

Thor tore his eyes away from the clouds and smiled at Jane, turning his palm over so his hand cradled both of hers. “I am, Jane,” he told her, leaning down to put a kiss on her forehead. “It is just… it is a lot of change. But I think it is good change.”

“I know it is,” Jane said as they started walking back over to the cars. “C’mon, Thor. Let’s get back
“to the tower.” Her expression became more determined as they climbed into the SUV. “Just because the Tesseract’s out of our reach doesn’t mean there’s nothing for me to do anymore. I have an entire universe to learn about now, and I’m going to be the first one to do it.”

*

The hum of the Bifrost machinery spinning down filled Loki’s ears, and the dissipating magical buildip made his skull vibrate as soon as they were deposited back into the Observatory. Sif was already moving, walking out toward the door where their horses waited for them, and Loki watched her with an eyebrow raised.

“Are you so glad to be back?” he asked. “I thought Midgard had grown on you.”

“It has,” Sif replied, looking back at him over her shoulder. “But Asgard will always be my home. You know this, Loki.”

She left the Observatory, and Loki could not stop his lips from twitching up, just a bit. “I do know it,” he replied, too quietly for her to hear.

“My king,” Heimdall rumbled, and Loki turned to look up at him, hiding his surprise at the address. Heimdall had never been warm with anyone, but he had been more aloof with Loki than most; now, though, Loki would have sworn that there was, at the very least, respect in the other’s eyes.

“Vanaheim has sent word,” he said. “Their emissary has been shown rooms in the palace, and awaits your summons to an audience.”

“I will see to it,” Loki replied. “Right now…”

“Loki!” Sif was already on her horse, the reins of Loki’s mount grasped in her hand. Gylfi danced under her, pawing the multicolored bridge in his eagerness to be off. “Are you coming?”

Heimdall had bent his head to pull his sword out of the podium, and as he walked out of the Observatory’s arching doorway, he paused, looking along the length of the bridge toward the golden gates of the city that stood open, to the fluted towers of the palace beyond that, the place he belonged.

“Well,” he murmured with a smile, “I’m home.”

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